

Belladonna

by tadsgirl

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Summary: Velma screamed revenge down the hall. Amber was all there was between her and his disaster. For Writergirl2003, mentor extraordinaire!

1. Chapter 1

I.

What a bitch of a day this had been. Amber laid in her bed and looked at the ceiling. Tracy had ruined everything. She screwed her dreams of being a star, of going on to Broadway or movies even television. The heifer took it all away from her. With agents there and live in front of all of Baltimore, she took it all away. However, at this moment, her thoughts were not of Tracy. Not even Link, the boy wonder, they were on her Mother and the strange events that followed the whole Miss Teenage Hairspray Pageant. If someone had told her a day ago that her Mother's words would make her afraid, very afraid, she would have totally disregarded them.

The whole Pageant thing was something Amber didn't even want to think about. What happened after was first and foremost on her mind. Her mother was dragged away by security, kicking and screaming. Not just screaming but screaming specifics. Screaming threats.

"Collins, you are going down." She bellowed, "I will destroy you. I will make you suffer every indignity that you have made me suffer. When you least expect it, you expect it! Watch your back, Collins! You are not going to make it out of this. You will not forget this night!"

Amber couldn't hear her anymore as she was pushed down the hallway. Good! She thought as she watched this unfold. This smarmy bastard deserved everything she could dish out. As he crowned Inez Stubbs, Amber wished him all the fires of hell that her mother could unleash. And she could, no one knew the power her mother held. Her connections, her cash and her body could get her anything she wanted.

Amber knew that she would make good on her threats as well. She had seen this kind of thing going on her whole life. Whether it was a love rival's disappearance, a new car or position desired, Velma got what she wanted and she didn't care at all who stood in her way. They didn't stand long.

But as Amber glowed in the revenge that she was about to witness, the strangest of all unfolded. She headed back to the dressing rooms to pack her belongings. She had no place here anymore. She planned to get her dresses, get her makeup and follow her mother. She snatched her clothes. What was she going to put these into? As she searched, the music from the show ended. Suddenly she heard steps and laughter coming down the hallway. Oh she didn't need this right now. She shot to the Ladies Room, pushed into a stall and lifted her feet. Confrontation was not on the menu tonight. Without her mother's support she knew she couldn't handle it. In the long run, Amber was not her mother and was never able to muster up the ability to be a royal bitch unless she stood behind her. Mother was long gone.

Amber sat uncomfortably, waiting for the noise to die down. After what seemed like hours, she peeped her head out. No one was around. Amber sighed with relief. She wanted to get her belongings, get to her car and get home, never to return. She began her search for a box. She walked down the line of vanities looking at the pictures, good luck charms and souvenirs from different vacations. Tears came to her eyes. Some of these kids had been horrible to her, some she considered friends. She lived her life for this show and her dreams that followed. Now they were all gone. She would never see this place again, she would not be in the spotlight. Link, and the envy of the other girls would be no more. Everyone would look at her differently, like she had cheated when she had nothing to do with any of it. Not to say that she didn't appreciate what her mother had done butâ€¦|â€¦|

Did she really? Amber was always deluded into thinking that she was the most popular dancer on the show. She was the star for three years. Amber knew that people loved her. She was the best dancer, the best singer. Now Amber doubted all of it. Had her mother done this before? Her thoughts drifted back to the first of these pageants. She was a skinny, gawky fourteen year old. She admired the older girls, some of which had been taking lessons since they were three. They moved with grace, they sang like angels and got fan mail by the bag load. Yet, she won the contest that year. The next and the next too. Was she really that wonderful or had her mother made it happen? Amber suddenly felt overwhelmed. She looked at herself in the mirror. Was she really that great or was this just another maternal fabrication? Her mascara ran down her face as she plopped into her chair, grabbing a tissue from the box there. She wiped the black liquid, took a fresh tissue and dipped it into the cold cream in front of her rewiping the stains. As she wiped looked positively plain. It really wasn't a pretty reflection that she stared at.

She wanted to believe that she was the prima donna her mother made her out to be. It was easier to put total trust in her mother than to actually do anything herself. She felt physically sick to her stomach at this moment. She dropped her head between her knees and attempted to control her sobs. It wasn't working too well.

She felt a hand slide down her back, "Amber, are you okay? Can I do anything to help?"

It was that Asshole Collins as her mother put it. Only his voice was deep and sympathetic. She looked up and stared into his eyes. No laughter, no smiles, no gloating. He seemed genuinely concerned. Did she really hate this man or was she told to?

"Thanks, I'll be okay." She stated but didn't feel it.

"Amber, I'm really sorry about what happened to you, " he began, "I know you were counting on that crown and to be signed by William Morris. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you."

Was this guy for real? "No you're not." She said coldly, "You're thrilled this worked out this way. Come on."

He looked down. "Well if we could have work things out for everyone concerned, in the way each wanted, it would have been better for sure. No one worked to personally destroy you. Things just snowballed."

"My mother did." She said with a sob, "It would have been alright if she wouldn't have done this. I could have gone on with the show, stayed in the background and have some of my life stay the same. Now what am I going to do?"

"Amber, look at me. If you want to come back here and continue to dance, I'll stand behind you." He said with a smile, "You are not your mother, you did nothing wrong."

"Those girls are going to be horrible to me. I'm not sureâ€¦|.."

"Not on my show." He said as he stroked her arm. "I'll have a talk with the council. There is no reason to make problems here. If anyone gives you a problem, you come to me. I'll nip it in the bud. You are a good dancer Amber, maybe someone saw you before and is willing to sign you anyway."

Did she even want that anymore?

"Just come back and finish out the year," he continued, "As God is my witness, no one will be say a word. You will at least have what you know until you can find what you want."

She stared at him in disbelief, trying to see the hint of triumph in his words. She couldn't find them. Who was this man? Why was he being so nice to her? Guilt? Maybe, but short of her mother, no one had ever been this genuinely considerate of her feelings and now even her mother was a question mark in her mind.

"I have to think about it, Corny." She replied.

"Think about it and the show will still be here next week." He slid an arm around her shoulders and gave a friendly hug, "You'll be okay little girl, no matter what. Understand that. Now let me walk you out to your car. Get some sleep and you'll feel better tomorrow."

He stood and extended an arm to her with a smile. She looked down. Everything was upside down. She had tons to think about. She stood and took his arm.

"Atta girl," he grinned. "Don't forget your purse. Where are your keys? Good. Now let's get you home. It will look different in the morning."

It all looked different now. Her mind raced as she drove. Why was this man being so nice to her? Was her mother wrong the whole time? Really, Corny didn't do this, Mother did by cheating with the tallies. Why was he responsible for her problems? It was a puzzle where the pieces didn't quite fit and she needed time to work on it.

As she entered the kitchen door, her mother was on the phone. "â€¦you'll find the first payment in your mailbox tomorrow. Make sure you are careful. Don't let anyone know. Because if anyone finds out Amy, it will be the last amount you see and I will deny everything. You must be as cautious asâ€¦"

Amy? Why was her mother talking to her? She had never given the makeup girl the time of day before this. She barked commands at her and basically treated her as just another worker bee in the hive. What was she conniving now?

2. Chapter 2

II

Amy was one of those people that Amber held total disdain for. She always had a story to top yours. She had worked on Broadway doing makeup for "Camelot". She was the youngest makeup artist in the company. Personally worked on Richard Burton. Helped get Julie Andrews the correct look for Guinevere. She was known all over New York. So what was she doing in local tv, was the question that always tickled Amber's mind.

Over and above everything else, she had dated Corny Collins. Every single girl on the show would have traded places with her, including Amber. Although Amber had cocked her head and threw her eyes to the ceiling when Vicky told her about it, yeah she was jealous. She had Link and didn't need anyone else, she told Vicky. Yet Corny was a step above Link. He wasn't the grand prize at High School, he was past that. He didn't have to puff himself up, showing what a man he was. He was smooth and emitted charm from every pore. What girl wouldn't love to have his total attention? And when Vicky said that Amy told that things had gone much farther than a date, Amber had to laugh, right out loud. If her mother couldn't get anywhere with the man, that haughty bitch sure didn't.

Mother used her body the way she wanted to. Always, it was a control thing. Either it got her something she wanted or to show domination. With Corny it was plain and simple domination. He was offered his own show, away from the store openings and weddings he did to make money in the past. It was a golden opportunity. Mr. Spritzer had seen him singing at his nephew's wedding and brought him to Velma's attention. Velma told him she wasn't happy with this kid. He was too "pretty" to be serious, she didn't need a Troy Donahue trying to host, his voice was too deep to appeal to the youngsters, on and on. Actually, she was setting him up for the "private meeting". The one where he showed what he really had to offer and in the same act, show that Mother controlled the situation. And was she surprised.

Amber saw her mother slam the back door closed after the meeting, while she worked on 6th grade math. There was fire in her eyes. Mother ran to the phone in her bedroom and started relaying the story to her sister in Omaha. Amber only heard bits and pieces from outside the door, but put it together anyway. This young upstart had been offered a job by the sponsor. But he wouldn't take the bait she offered. Goody two shoes Catholic. She hated religious freaks. He had actually turned down the job. Walked out. Spritzer saw him leave and followed. He kid had the job no matter what because the sponsor wanted him. No, no, no the kid said nothing to the sponsor, but who the hell did he think he was anyway? Amber remembered thinking that she was talking about kissing "the kid" at that time. She learned the reality of it not long after she was twelve, when she walked in on her Mother and one of the dancers. She was kissing, just not lips.

When Amy bragged of her passionate lovemaking, Amber knew the lies she told. She couldn't relay the story of WHY she knew she was lying, just that she did know. Amber was very good at keeping secrets when it came to her mother. This was no different. Amy was a lying braggart and Amber easily dismissed her.

So why was her mother talking to this woman? What did Amy have to offer her? There was an angle that made Amy worth the time of day, what was it? Mother was making payments, this was big. Velma had enough money from her dead husbands to swim in it, but money was not really important to her. Power is what she craved. It was her addiction, not easily satisfied either. Velma had no power at this point. Oh they would be alright and Velma would either buy or sleep her way to a new position, but when Velma took a step backward, she always stepped on someone. Who was it that she was crushing this time?

Amber studied the swirls of the ceiling and her mind wandered to the deep blue eyes that were so unbelievably kind to her today. Corny! That was it! Amy was always around him professionally, perhaps personally. Amy the makeup whore was going to aid Velma in her plan. Amber's heart sank. This wasn't right.

She padded downstairs in her stiletto slippers and satin bathroom. Her mother was thinking at the table. Amber walked past her without saying a word and put water on for tea. She grabbed a Royal Albert cup for herself and her mother. Mother had already gone through about half a fifth of Remy Martin, normally reserved for her A-list Christmas party. Guess that wouldn't be going on this year. May as well drown one's sorrows in the good stuff if some is available.

"Mother, can I get you some tea?" Amber asked quietly.

"I don't want any damn tea." She growled, "I want him to pay."

Oh this didn't look good. "Alright." Amber tried to ignore her drunken rant. She poured herself a cup and sat down across the table. "So what do we do now, Mother?"

Velma stared through glassy eyes. She looked at Amber like she had three noses, "How the hell do I know?"

Amber began to study her as she downed another Remy. Somehow she was different. Like someone had taken her mother and transformed her. She seemed hard, not just drunk. Normally, even smashed to the gills, Velma could pull off grace and charm. Not at this moment. Either Amber was seeing her in a different way, or Velma was pushed past where Amber had ever seen her. That was pretty far. Down, even farther than when she had been under investigation for the death of her last husband. She was cleared of any wrongdoing, and the stockholders worked to keep it out of the papers, but she had sunk pretty far. Amber remembered looking at her and thinking how clever she was. She was totally unaffected by the whole thing to the outside world. Only Amber saw her depressed.

This wasn't depression, it was flat out rage. It was an emotion that Amber had always been terrified of in her mother. When she was on the brink of rage, she would lash out at the nearest object or person. Amber had been in the way a couple times. A dislocated shoulder at five, broken fingers at eight, numerous cuts and contusions through the years, not to mention that blackened eye just last year from being in the trajectory of an ashtray, but easily covered with make-up. Along with no regrets on Velma's part. She would laugh that when Mother was angry, better to get out of the way. When Amber was little, she was scared. As she got older, she learned to run. She had to stay firm for a couple minutes to see if her Mother would clue her in to the plan.

Velma didn't look at her, but mumbled. "Asshole doesn't know who he's playing with. That bastard will hit the dirt before I'm done with him, mark my words. He won't be standing by the end of it. Let the asshole dance with broken knees..."

She droned on and on as she poured another shot into a highball glass and threw it down her throat. Public humiliation was never on Velma's menu and she wasn't taking it well. Amber realized that if she sat there too much longer, she might feel that glass smash near, or on her. She quietly slid the chair out and stood slowly. As Velma continued her diatribe, Amber slipped back upstairs.

Did she even need to get involved with this? Life could just go on with whatever plan her mother held for her. It would be easy to just forget about what she had just heard, go to school and ignore whatever her mother did. That's how she lived her entire life. Amber decided to forget about it and let the chips fall where they may.

Yet, as she laid there in her bed, she realized that no one knew her mother like she did. No one knew the ins and outs of the woman's scheming as well. Mother would take a step and Amber could mirror it. Years of experience gave her the ability. She knew Corny Collins would go down. Did he deserve it? What had the man ever done to them? He took years of abuse from her mother and bratty tantrums from her with a smile and a shake of the head. Compared to the men her mother brought to their house and her bed, he was a saint. Who did Amber really want to help at this moment? Her mother with the cash and power to back her or this man who could not possibly know what was coming his way? The low or high road?

Amber decided on the high road.

3. Chapter 3

III

Amber arrived at the studio to stares and cold shoulders. She tried very hard to walk through as if nothing happened. She wasn't used to this. Link stood in a back corner holding Tracy, colored kids were everywhere. Amber heard the whispers and laughter. Then Shelley walked up.

"Well, well, well. Our Miss Teenage Hairspray. Or rather our EX-Miss Teenage Hairspray." She looked at Amber through smiling eyes as the council members snickered, "Where's your Mommy Amber? Who's gonna push your ass in front of the camera now? Who's gonna spread her legs â€¦."

Corny interrupted and snatched Shelley's arm, "May I speak to you over here for a minute?" he said as her skirts swirled away. There was no option to it. Amber was taken aback with how forcefully he yanked that arm. Shelley nearly lost her balance as they turned to walk to a far corner. The room was silent as shocked faces stared at the dancer and the host. Corny's voice was so low that although everyone strained, he could not be heard. Amber could see the seriousness of his face.

Shelley's hands grasped her hips as she bellowed, "But Cornyâ€¦!"

He slipped an arm around her shoulders and leaned in. Whatever he said cut Shelley quickly. She pulled away from him and yelled, "Fine!" She stormed away.

"Okay, council kids" Corny announced as he strutted back to wide eyes and dropped jaws, "It's time for a meeting. I want everyone's attention. And Shelley that includes you." He bellowed. Shelley stopped in her tracks and returned to the group, flushed and angry.

Corny began in a strong voice, "Many things have changed on this show, many things have not. Now, I know that every one of you kids will miss the strong presence of Mrs. Von Tussle." He smiled. The kids snickered and whispered but he continued, "Now some of you may think that we are going to party like a substitute teacher has arrived. That's not how it's going to be. I expect every one of you to be professional and courteous to all of our dancers." He moved toward Amber and put an arm around her waist. She looked down. "And I mean ALL."

They looked at each other and were stunned into silence.

"If any one of you cannot remain professional" he declared, "you can clear out your vanity now. Having Negro Day combined with the cast of regulars means that you can be weeded out without a replacement. Mr. Spritzer has given me that ability and I will do it. I need twenty dancers, right now I have forty. Your best behavior is required on this show. I will have nothing else. Nothing I hear, nothing I see will go unnoticed. So watch your Ps and Qs kids. Your spot on this show depends on it."

Amber looked up at him. He winked and released her. "Now let's go, kiddies. We have a show to do. Best behavior, okay? I would like to

keep our little family together"

Shock was too soft of a word to describe the looks on those faces. Not a single person looked at her. Through the uncomfortable silence, she made her way to her vanity. Some of these kids could be evil, some could be silly, but not a single one was stupid. When Corny Collins spoke, they had better listen.

Amber began to reline her eyes as she caught sight of Amy taking off her coat. She watched her sweep by to Corny's chair and fuss with the make-up there. Amber couldn't be obvious about watching her. Just diligent. The kids slowly began to converse and the noise level picked up to a drone. Amber glanced over as Amy made her way to the Station Manager's office. With key in hand, she slipped in the door unnoticed. Corny's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Okay kids this is our list of dancers needed today." He began, "This will be the order of the roll call so remember who is in front and behind you. If you did not make the list this week, you may leave but please be available for next week's show. We are splitting you alphabetically, with the exception of Inez, Link and Tracy. We're going to need the three of you here no matter what. Let's line up and the rest of you will be released for the week. See you then."

Amber prayed it was last names and not firsts. However her name was called right after Duane, one of the colored boys. Corny smiled at her when he announced it. Amber smiled back while continuing to watch for Amy out of the corner of her eye. Suddenly it hit her, Mother was going to find out she was there. Especially if she danced. She was supposed to be researching a paper at the Library, not dancing at the studio. Amy would most probably clue her in anyway, but seeing her on tv would drive her mother nuts unless Amber could come up with an angle to excuse it. She needed time. Amy slipped out of the office with a paper in her hand. She rolled it discreetly, and made her way to the make-up chair. She looked around and stuck the paper into her purse.

Paper. Something simple, something stored in that office. What could it be? She couldn't think about it right now Amber stood and walked to Corny.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but can I talk to you a second?" she asked delicately.

He looked up from the podium.

"Corny, can I be put on the list for next week?"

"Amber, no one will bother youâ€¦" he repeated.

She looked down, "My mother doesn't know I'm here."

"Hmmm, not good." He acknowledged, "You have to tell her Amber. You're still underage and your contract is signed by her. Without her permission, you can't dance. Take this week off, and when I see you next week we'll assume you have her blessing, okay?"

"That's right, I'll tell her." She said as she walked away. She heard him call Shelley back as she made her way back to the vanity. Shelley ran to grab her place behind Duane.

Now this was getting complicated. She needed an excuse for her mother, she needed to make it into that office, she really just wanted to go home and sleep. This might be more difficult than she could handle, but she felt a commitment to it that she wouldn't let go. She would go as far as she could. She glanced back to Corny getting a final powder from Amy. He smiled as he touched her cheek. Oh that wasn't good. Amber wanted to pounce on this bitch. He was totally vulnerable and had no clue. However that caress and his little pep talk to the council, gave her new resolve.

As the kids began to dance, Amber grabbed her keys and looked around. Everyone was busy. This was her chance.

4. Chapter 4

IV

The tumblers turned and the door slowly opened. It was dark but she made her way to the desk and flipped on the small reading light. Her eyes adjusted. What was there? What did that traitor taken? Amber looked to the desk itself. There was a picture of her with her mother, smiling an identical smile. Amber moved it face down onto the desk. Bad memories would not help her. She started opening drawers.

Pens, make-up, blank papers. Nothing here. She opened another, crackers, silverware and costume jewelry, nothing. The third drawer reveled her first clue. Contracts. Amber looked to the file cabinets Top left, A thru C.

When a contract was signed, it had four copies. One to the signee, one to Mr. Spritzer and two to be filed. This was standard for all contracts. Amber flipped through the files. "Collins, C" was easily found. She pulled out a sheet and looked for another. It was gone. Amber scanned the page. It looked like any of the others. Back to the drawer. She compared it to a blank but there wasn't much difference. There was no signature at the bottom. Amber turned it over to see her mother's handwriting and Corny's name scrawled underneath. She read it.

***Television Host**

The Host shall not commit any act or do anything which might tend to bring Host into public disrepute, contempt, scandal, or ridicule, or which might tend to reflect unfavorably on the Network, any sponsor of a program, any such sponsor's advertising agency, any stations broadcasting or scheduled to broadcast a program, or any licensee of the Network, or to injure the success of any use of the Series or any program"

It was a standard morality clause. Her mother had signed many a contract with the clause in it, yet laughed about it constantly. If one was cautious or powerful, the clause meant nothing. Even if one is thought to have poisoned a husband. Powerful friends negated the clause every time. Velma had powerful friends. Corny did not.

What could possibly be gained by having a copy of this contract? Corny's life was basically an open book. He didn't go to the parties

for the Baltimore television personalities that Amber and her mother frequented. He was even known to play Santa at the local children's hospital on his own dime, which always conflicted with WYZZ's Christmas bash. If anyone kept a morality clause, it was Corny Collins. That couldn't be it. How in the world could her mother use this?

Amber slipped the contracts back to their separate spots. She had to think about it. She grabbed the picture from the desk. It was a happier time and somehow she needed to have it. Maybe she could hide it in her desk at home where it would be safe. No one noticed her at all when she tiptoed to her car. Or so she thought.

When she arrived home she was greeted by a low growl, "What the hell were you doing there, Amber?"

"I, ah Iâ€¦" Amber couldn't get the words out before the vase, water and begonias smashed on the wall next to her. Amber felt the flying crystal shrapnel slice her cheek. Her hand instinctively covered it and she ducked.

"I needed to get my Biology book!" Amber cried as she moved, "Mr. Spritzer asked me to stay. The kids weren't happy and neither was Corny but he said thatâ€¦"

"What?" Velma stopped before another object flew.

Amber spoke as quickly as she could. "My Biology book was in the drawer of my vanity. I had to get it. Mr. Spritzer said that I should continue to dance until they found a replacement. I told him I would have to ask you. When Corny said no, he said yes. I told him that I couldn't this week, butâ€¦"

Amber noticed her mother's brain ticking. She was paying little attention to her words past Corny's name. Suddenly her eyes snapped back to her daughter. "So what were you doing in my office?"

"Oh Mother!" Amber cooed, "I so wanted to get your picture. It's my favorite! You look so beautiful here and I just couldn't leave it to be thrown in the trash. I just used the key you gave me and snatched it." She lifted the frame to her mother, relieved at her turn of good luck. She had an angel watching over her, or maybe he did and she was just in the shadows of it. Either way she felt blessed at the moment.

Velma looked to the picture and smiled. "That's my good girl. Come on. Mother needs a big hug."

Amber smiled weakly She hugged her Mother with gusto which is what she always expected after one of her tirades. She pulled back to see blood on Mother's dress. Velma looked down. "Oh Darling you need to go take care of that. Now don't you worry about my dress, the dry cleaners will take it right out. I'll just change before I leave for my meeting."

"I think you should wear your new blue satin dress Mother, it shows off your eyes," Amber said as she pulled her fingers back from her cheek. It was still bleeding. Damn, the deep ones weren't easy to cover.

"I think that's a marvelous idea," Velma sang, "Oh and Amber when you go to the studio next week, why don't you just retrieve the rest of my things. That's a dear. Now ta-ta and kiss-kiss. Mother is going to change and get going, alright?"

"Of course!" she smiled. Mother didn't even see her as she walked away. Being the child of narcissist was never easy. Puffing the woman up, watching that you don't outshine her, embarrass or belittle her by words or actions. It was a constant job. Amber served her well and it was a way of life. Asking her mother HOW she knew about the studio would do nothing more than escalate the drama. Amber slipped to her room and surveyed the cut on her cheek. Luckily it was small, although deep. She pressed on it with a tissue hoping the bleeding would stop.

Amber was overwhelmed with a feeling of being in too deep. What would the reaction be if Mother found out that she was working against her? Maybe it was all too much. She threw herself onto her bed. Now she was stuck. Whether she continued on this path or not, she had to go to that studio every other week. Her thoughts drifted to the man who was so very kind to her today. Could she watch him destroyed before her very eyes? Could she live with herself after? Would it even be the same there when he was gone? Tears welled in her eyes. For all the things she had done, for all the fits she threw, for all her spoiled brat moments, this was her redemption. She was going to protect him as well as she could. After that, she could go on with her life knowing that she did her best. And hopefully, he would never find out what she had done.

5. Chapter 5

V.

No slips, no stumbles, Amber made it through the show without any mishaps. Her new position was second from last in the roll call, but it didn't bother her at all. Some of the girls even spoke to her, in a friendly manner. It started at school when Noreen slipped her a note.

"Amber,

Sorry about what happened. I'm glad you seem okay.

Noreen"

Amber quickly scribbled a note with a simple thank you and the word "hug" in a heart. She smiled as she passed it back. Maybe she would be okay afterall. When she returned to her vanity, a chocolate bar hid a note. It was from Duane, that boy she was to have followed in roll call.

"A

Don't let them get you down.

D"

She was beginning to get a whole lot of secret friends. It seemed to fit her new life. Now her time was spent observing, instead of

pushing to the front of the line. Over the next month, she allowed herself to listen to conversations around her, let music play in her head but mostly watch. Watch every move that Corny Collins made. What she heard and what she saw did not please her at all.

He looked deliriously happy. Amy fussed around him. She was his new found passion and all her attention fell onto him. They looked at each other, smiled and blushed. They hid and embraced. She spoke to him with so much syrup. It was overly sweet, like Syrup of Ipecac and Amber wanted to vomit whenever she heard it. Amber watched and waited. Something was going to happen here. She just didn't know what, or when.

So Amber wasn't surprised when the doorbell rang at her house. Mother was at a "meeting" with the head of the local Lion's Club. She would not be home for hours. Amber bounded down the steps and opened the door to Amy's face under a blonde wig. Ugh.

"Hi Amber! Is your Mother here?" she asked as she lifted her sunglasses.

"Oh I'm sorry Hon" Amber flashed a huge fake smile, "She's out now. Can I help you?"

"Yeah you can. Give her this" she handed her a large manila envelope. "Tell her that our deal is done. I expect to get what I deserve at the new address. And if I don't get that, everyone will hear about it. Understand?"

Amber repeated her words back to her. Amy turned to go but hesitated, "Good Luck Amber. You deserved that crownâ€¦" and she was gone.

Amber held the solution to the puzzle in her hand. She needed to see how it all fit together. What did Amy find that would destroy Corny Collins? She carefully unwrapped the twine around the closure, opened the envelope and slipped her hand inside. She pulled out a paper and what felt like glossies. The paper was Corny's contract, the fourth missing copy. Amber moved it to the bottom of the pile and gasped. No way, in God's Name, no way.

Amber had seen pictures like this in the magazines under her mother's bed. She used them to "help" the older men, whom she used for whatever she needed. To Amber, they were always crass and made her uncomfortable. These particular pictures made her head swirl. She collapsed against the wall and felt as if she were about to be sick. Amber had seen these kinds of pictures alright, but never like this. Not with Amy and certainly not with him.

She didn't want to look at them. She wanted to pack them back in the envelope and forget what she saw. But something told her to look again. They were black and white and fuzzy. Amy's face was clear as day. However, the man under her, in the throws of passion was not as easily recognizable. Amber turned the picture and squinted. If she were told it was him, it would be him. Dark hair in his style, but she wasn't sure. She flipped to the next picture. It was from the neck down on the man as Amy performed for the camera. She studied all five. Not a single picture was without a doubt Corny Collins. Amber knew in her heart that none of them were actually him. But how could she prove it? Who would believe that these pictures were here without

seeing them? She dared not walk them out of the house. Her mother could be home anytime. Who would work to clear him? Who cared about him as much as she did?

Oh no, she didn't just think that. She shook her head and concentrated on the mission at hand. Who could help her? Not one of the kids. No one could find out about it who would reveal anything. Who?

Maybelle. She adored him. Amber had heard her speaking of him all the time, like he was someone she loved and admired. Amber was sure she would help him, but would she believe her? This was a chance she had to take. She had no other choice.

Amber slipped the contents back into the envelope and walked it upstairs to her mother's study. She took a paper from the basket and quickly scribbled a note regarding Amy and that she would be at the Library for the evening. For an instant, she thought of destroying them, but her mother's devious thought process made her reconsider. There were negatives somewhere. At the point her mother connected Amy dropping these off and their disappearance, Amber loses her position to protect him. This plot would fall through and she would be on to the next. And then she could do nothing more. The chips fall where they may. Amber refused to take that chance.

She grabbed a phone book. She needed an address fast. Motormouth Maybelle's Record Shop. She found it quickly. Baltimore street map in hand, Amber headed to her car. She was scared to death, but tried not to think about it right now. Amber had never been down to this neighborhood and you don't get any whiter than Amber Von Tussle. Would she be safe? Would her car be safe? She had no choice but to try.

Not long after, she pulled up in front of the store. She took a deep breath and swallowed hard. She locked her car and walked in. Every head turned. Amber tried to hold her herself as steady as she could. She looked around but didn't see Maybelle anywhere. Oh Lord this would have been so much easier if she were behind the counter. Amber began to flip through the albums, she saw few that she new. Suddenly a familiar voice sounded behind her. "Well Amber Von Tussle" he began, "You slummin' today?"

She turned and stared into Seaweed's eyes.

\

6. Chapter 6

VI.

"Oh Seaweed, you startled me." She said with a bit of relief. Seaweed had never treated her badly, although he was seeing Tracy's best friend. He was polite to her and he showed the grace his mother taught him on a general basis. He stared at her with a grin, "I'm actually here to see your mother. Is she available?"

His eyes opened wide, but he realized that she was serious. "Why yes. She's in the back. I'll get her." He walked away with a puzzled look and closed the door behind him. Once he spoke with her, she wasn't

being scrutinized anymore. She wasn't there to harass anyone. They all ignored her.

Seaweed's head popped out of the door and motioned for her to follow him. Maybelle sat at a desk in the back. She was smiling a very professional smile. "May I help you?"

She didn't even address her by her name. Amber was momentarily deterred. "Please ma'am, I need your help."

Maybelle's eyebrows flew up and Seaweed snickered. She continued undaunted, "Well actually it's not me, it'sâ€¦" she looked up at Seaweed, "Would there be any way that I could speak to you alone, ma'am?"

"Oh no I don't think so!" Seaweed exclaimed as he moved closer to his Momma.

Maybelle looked at Amber. She was trembling, she wouldn't look her in the eye. There was something big going on with this girl. Maybelle would have loved to kick her to the curb and tell her to find her own Momma. But was something different about her. She had been put in her place after that pageant, and she seem to stay there. She wasn't the same haughty brat that ruled the studio with her mother, if anything, she had turned demure. Just the fact that she sat on the other side of town was a telling sign. This girl was in trouble. Maybelle's curiosity was peaked.

"Now Seaweed you go on and see to my soup on the stove." Maybelle began, "Miss Amber and I are going to have a little talk."

Seaweed opened his mouth to protest but Maybelle waved him away. He reluctantly turned, gave Amber one last look and headed out the door.

Amber did not look up, "I know that we have had problems in the past, ma'am" she began, "but I don't know where else to turn. I need your help. No, not really. Really, Corny needs your help."

Maybelle wasn't sure she heard correctly, "I'm sorryâ€¦"

"My mother. She is out to destroy him. She blames all the problems she has on him. She is worse than I have ever seen her before. Please you have to believe me." Amber pleaded as she looked up to the eyes of the older woman.

Maybelle wasn't sure what to make of it. The girl looked sincere. And really, it wasn't about her, it was about him. She studied her for a second. "Go on." Maybelle finally said.

"There are pictures. Bad pictures. Of him and Amy. I saw them."

Maybelle gasped. His reputation was flawless. She knew the kind of man her friend was and his appearance matched the facts. He was a gentleman who took the rules of today's society as gospel. Nothing done less than proper. He didn't go there. She knew he loved Amy, but would not be endangering his job or morals to have her just yet. This couldn't be right.

"Where are they?" Maybelle asked

"My mother has them. Along with his contract, signed, with a morality clause. She's going to use them. I'm not sure how, but I know she is going to use them." Amber stated. "But ma'am, you have to know. I looked at them. I looked hard. It's not him, I'm sure of it. She's setting him up, with someone who looks like him. If someone wants to see him there, he will be there. I'm sure though, it's not him."

Maybelle had seen more of life than this child could possibly imagine. She had known women like Velma before, although none with her skill and power. She wouldn't put anything past her.

"Where did she get the pictures?" Maybelle asked.

"From Amy."

Maybelle smelled a rat. She was being set up, but she held her own set of skills that in some ways couldn't be matched. She would string this baby along and find out how it was that Velma thought she could use her daughter. "Amy?"

Amber knew that she didn't believe her. Who would? "Look, I can see that I've made a mistake coming here." She stood and extended her hand, "I'll just go now."

Ah-ha! Caught! Maybelle wasn't going to let her go this easily. "So why would Amy do this to him? What is the motivation here Amber?"

"Cash. Mother offered her cash the night of the contest. That's all I know." Amber felt crushed. She had hoped that Maybelle would take the ball on this and do something, anything. She wasn't even sure what she wanted her to do, but it wasn't going to happen. Amber had no allies. She was on her own. "Please, I don't want to waste any more of your time Mrs. Stubbs. Thank you for seeing me."

Maybelle studied her. She looked tired, broken. Amber turned to go and Maybelle replied, "You're welcome." She just let her walk out.

Maybelle thought for a moment. What did this girl have to gain from this? What did her mother have to gain? Were they hoping Maybelle would go to Corny and break up his relationship and look foolish herself? A feeling she had told her that something that Amber said was sincere. Maybe the look on her face or how Corny had actually stood behind her after that pageant. He told Maybelle that Amber was just a lost child and needed some guidance. He felt sorry for her. Maybelle thought about his words. Was she actually here for him?

Maybelle bolted out the door. She ran to the street and spied Amber in her car. Her head was on the steering wheel and she was sobbing. Maybelle's heart broke. She knocked on the window. "Come on, Honey. Let me get you some tea and we'll see what we can do."

Amber smiled weakly.

7. Chapter 7

****_Hi readers! I can't get over how many times this story has been favorited! Thanks! If you get a chance, drop a "hi" in the reviews. We are all busy for the Holidays so I'll continue to post a chapter a day no matter what._****

****_Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa or whatever you're celebrating this year!_****

VII

Truth be told, Amy had been a thorn in Maybelle's side for some time. Since the show was integrated, she was required to work on all the dancers. She refused to listen to the girls ask her to get the proper colors for their skin tones. She stuck with her own kit making the kids look like ghosts. Even after Maybelle personally spoke with her, she ignored them. Most of the girls wouldn't let her near them. Amy seemed perfectly happy with it.

When she first began to date Corny, Maybelle tried very hard to like her. She seemed shallow and demanding but there was something that he saw that Maybelle just didn't. She was pretty and tall. She walked with an air of refinement when he was around and acted like a teenager when he wasn't. Her chameleon attitude bothered Maybelle. She became who people wanted her to be. For the white people that is. When Maybelle, who was used to family dinners that included Corny Collins once a month, invited them to dine, Amy had excuse after excuse. Maybelle was far from stupid. She knew the reason they never showed up. She let it go because Corny seemed happy, but it bothered her from the start.

Now here sat Amber Von Tussle, with a story to tell that fit Maybelle's image of the woman, not Corny's. Amber quietly studied her tea cup. Could this girl really have had this big of a change of heart? Could she possibly be thinking of someone other than herself?

She had told the story to Maybelle from beginning to end. It seemed to make sense that Amber would come to her. Velma had always been a little off kilter from the rest of the world. Maybelle saw how hard she pushed Amber. And being the future star, Amber always went along. Amber was basically friendless, hard to talk to, and a spoiled child who had nothing but possessions, her world was her mother and the image she held. When the image was taken away, her mother was to blame. Maybelle just never gave Amber the credit for smarts to see who actually did it. Amber surprised her.

"So basically, no one knows what my mother is capable of. But I do. If this plan doesn't work, she will be on to another. That's why I'm there, Mrs. Stubbs. I can't let her do this." She explained

"Maybelle, Honey." She began and Amber smiled, "Now, let's think this through. What can we do to short stop this whole plan?"

"Does anyone know where Amy came from?" Amber thought out loud, "She says she was on Broadway, but does anyone know for sure?"

"New Yorkâ€¦" Maybelle mused, "Let me make a call. I'll be right

back."

Maybelle was good friends with her Union representative. In New York, the unions held even more power than here in Baltimore. People knew people. They knew reputations. And basically, unions were unions. They held together. Maybelle had never given a thought to why Amy left a much bigger gig to work local tv, but she was going to find out.

"Anita? It's Maybelle Stubbs." She smiled, "Yeah things are going well. How's that new grandbaby?" she continued with the pleasantries then got to the point. "We have a make-up girl working for us that I need some information on. Seems this girl worked Broadway and is now with us. Causing problems for a friend of mine. Name is Amy Hughesâ€|â€|."

Anita promised to find out what she could. Trouble makers were never needed and usually blacklisted with files to back the decision. If this woman had a file, Anita could get it. Maybelle stressed the urgency of the situation and Anita promised a follow-up call as soon as possible. If need be, the contents of that file could be disclosed to her employer, Anita guaranteed it.

Maybelle returned to Amber. "Not to worry, girl. If that woman so much as tripped on a step, the union knows about it. Something's fishy Amber. I can feel it."

"I really have to go Mrs.â€|..Maybelle, "Amber stated as she stood, "my mother thinks I'm at the library. But please, I have to ask you one favor. No one must find out about this. No one. Not Seaweed, not Inez, not Corny, no one. If anyone gets wind of this, I can't do anymore. My mother doesn't take defeat well. She will begin another plot when this falls through."

Maybelle nodded. She looked at the girl and saw something more than apprehension. "And if my mother finds out that I helped you, I'm not sure what will happen to me. She can be a littleâ€|..I really don't want to find out." She turned and left.

So that was where that black eye came from last year. Maybelle had suspected that Velma could be a violent woman. She didn't want to believe that her child took the brunt of it. No mother should hurt her child. Not a single one.

Amber arrived home to a still empty house. Her mother must be "working" on something big. Or maybe someone big. She didn't care at all. She ran a bubble bath and slipped in. Why couldn't life be easy anymore? Where all she cared about was what the fashions from Europe were and having her hair done? She knew why. As she stepped out of the tub and wrapped the towel around her, she pushed his sweet smile out of her mind. She couldn't think about him. She didn't want to care as much as she did.

8. Chapter 8

VIII.

Seaweed gave her a strange look as he handed Amber the note at school not long after. It was from his mother. She would meet her at a

family restaurant near the studio after school. A place where the kids didn't go and her mother would not be caught dead in. Don't be late, it was important.

Maybelle sat in a back booth when Amber arrived. She slid in next to her. "What happened?" Amber asked breathlessly.

Maybelle pulled out her hand written notes. Anita had phoned the New York office. The union held a file on Amy Hughes a mile high. She had been caught stealing from other employees, got into a fight with another make-up artist over brushes, etc, etc. But the most telling of all was the word, "Blackmail" Maybelle had scrawled across the bottom. Seemed Amy wanted to be a star herself. She had slept with one of the directors and threatened to go to his wife about it if she was not given a part. The director called her on it. He and his wife had been separated months before. He called the union and she was fired. She would not work on Broadway again. The union dropped her like a hot potato.

Did Velma know when she hired her? Who knows, but unions had not taken hold in television the way the Stage Actors Guild controlled New York. Everyone was unionized there. Here, one could work without being unionized. Maybelle was sure that this was the reason Amy returned to Baltimore. Now Velma's cash could take her to her next city, wherever that may be.

The pictures arrived on the desk of the Chairman of the Board the day after Velma got them. They were delivered by courier. The Chairman had been studying the letter of resignation from the make-up girl. She left no forwarding address which he found odd. He had no where to send her last paycheck. It was strange.

Then he opened the envelope delivered to him. He knew why this girl had left in the way that she did. Corny received a call at home. He was to report this morning because circumstances had changed regarding his employment. He blanched when the pictures were shown. He saw she was with someone else and it devastated him. Then the other shoe dropped. If these pictures got out, he harmed the show. He held a certain reputation with the teenagers and parents. This kind of scandal would reflect on the image they wanted. This would not do.

Corny denied it was him, but Chairman wouldn't hear it. He left the office and began to pack his belongings. Before he could leave, the Chairman's secretary called him back. The call from New York had revealed many things about the girl who sent the pictures. While the Chairman was still apprehensive about the pictures being made public, he was willing to believe that the man in the photos was not him. He would keep his job unless things could not be kept under wraps. Reasonably things could be kept quiet.

And of course, this meant much more than his job to Corny. She was his future. His 2.5 kids and that house in the suburbs. He had it taken away. Drunk looked better than life for a couple days. Maybelle visited him at home, but the conversation was nearly useless. He had to find a way to get over this himself. Maybelle hugged him for all she was worth and told him that he was always welcome in her family. Secretly she wished she could tell him who cared about him as much as she did. Tell him that he was right about that girl he stood by. It would give him some consolation in the situation. But she promised

and she kept her word.

Amber explained that Velma watched the show that day expecting that it would be without it's host. She found nothing but disappointment. Raging disappointment. They almost lost the television itself. Velma became sullen after her explosion. Amber didn't explain that she made it through with a bruise to her arm and a bump on her forehead. She had mentally noted a need to move quicker when things started to fly, but knew that in order to see what was coming next she must observe her mother as well.

However, she did say that as far as her mother knew, her plan had holes that had been breached. The next one would be stronger, and harder to break. Amber must stick by her and observe more than she had before.

Maybelle touched the bump on Amber's head. "Where did this come from, little girl?"

Amber blushed, "I walked into a door."

"You should be more careful, Amber." Maybelle said knowing full well who caused that bump, "We don't have a makeup woman to take care of it anymore."

Amber smiled, "At this point, I don't think that's bad news." Then the smile disappeared, "She will try something else. This is not the end of it."

"I know you got that right." Maybelle exclaimed.

Amber looked down, "Is he okay?"

"I can't tell you he is, but I can tell you that he is in better shape than he would have been. He'll recover. Time heals all wounds." She felt bad for her. This girl was risking too much for a coworker. She knew she was doing it for the only one who ever stood by her when her world turned upside down. Her gratitude might just get her into a pickle she couldn't get out of, "You need to worry about yourself as well. You need to avoid those doors that jump in your way"

"Yes, yes I will." She affirmed. It was going to be tougher than this lady could know.

And the pain in his eyes when she came back to the studio was almost too much for Amber to bear. He smiled and danced, as any professional would. But she could see. He was a shell of his former self. He didn't laugh, he didn't joke. He was doing the show from far away. The audience didn't know, but the council did. So did she.

She pulled a small box from her purse and dropped it onto his podium as she walked away. She was long out the door before he found it. His name was embossed in gold on the tag. He pulled the string and opened the lid. Four Golden Truffles sat inside. They were available from only one store downtown. Very few people could afford them including himself. Velma brought them in one Christmas. They had been a corporate gift, but of course she and Amber couldn't eat them. She gave them to him. He fussed how creamy and delicious they were, passing them around for everyone to taste. He knew where they came from. He couldn't help but smile his first genuine smile in a while,

as he popped one into his mouth. Yep, all that girl needed was a chance to be a caring person. He was glad he decided to give her that chance.

9. Chapter 9

IX

Weeks passed and Amber began to feel that she was wrong in assuming her mother would remain obsessed in her revenge. Velma was hired to manage one of the finer restaurants in Baltimore, owned by the head of the Lion's Club. She was gone a lot. It made Amber's life much easier. She could basically come and go as she pleased. No more massive shopping trips or television parties to attend, she hit the books with a vengeance. Amber wanted to go to college. She wanted to go far away and study to be something. She wasn't sure what that was yet, but college prep courses were hard and she had to put in a huge effort to them. She might just turn out just fine.

The show went on and Amber danced every other week. Maybelle was right, Corny got brighter as the time went on. Every family invited him for dinner. Each council member wanted to show how much he was loved. They did their best to keep him busy. He started act like the person he had been and Amber began to relax. Maybe walking away after graduation would be a relief instead of a bundle of anxiety. She allowed herself to be happy as well.

Amber munched an apple as she searched for a protractor from her mother's desk. Each drawer was a bigger mess and eventually she put the apple down as she looked. Finally, Amber pulled the chair out and opened the large middle drawer. There on a pad was a phone number. Amber stared at it. It looked awfully familiar but in a distant sort of way. She remembered dialing the number many a time. Where did she know it from?

She made her way back to her own room. She pulled the phone book out of her purse and flipped the pages as she walked back to retrieve her apple. Not in the A-B section, not in the C-D. She went from page to page. She picked the apple up and was about to bite when she found the number. Wheeler, Brenda. Brenda? What was her number doing here?

Amber had not spoken to Brenda since she took her "leave of absence". Rumor was that her parents had sent her to an aunt's home to give birth and give the baby up for adoption. Everyone knew Brenda's boyfriend was someone her parents didn't approve of. Eddy had been a wild teenager, in trouble with the law a couple times. Stupid things boys do. Soaping windows and stealing beer. Nothing serious. Brenda adored him and he felt the same. They talked of marrying some day and raising a couple kids when Eddy joined the navy. She swore she would wait for him forever. He swore she was the only one for him. They consummated their love that night. Things didn't work out well for Brenda. The love of her life remained true to her but far away on a ship near Korea. Love letters flew back and forth and Eddy was thrilled with being a father. However the parents would hear none of it and decided to make plans for her. Brenda needed to do what they said in order to survive but she told her friends that she would die before she gave their child away and she would do anything to get to him. At the time, Amber sighed at her undying love. Straight out of

the pages of a romance novel. It was the sweetest thing she had ever heard.

Now Amber's mind ticked. What exactly would Brenda do to get to Eddy? Would she lie? Would she take money to lie? Would she destroy another person to make it to her baby's father? It all seemed so romantic at the time. Carrying his baby, Brenda would move heaven and earth to get to Eddy. Now it looked scary. She needed to find out how far Brenda would go.

She dialed the number and her mother picked up. "Hi Mrs. Wheeler, this is Amber Von Tussle. How are you?"

Mrs. Wheeler was actually a very nice woman. Her daughter was very much like her. Amber got along well with Brenda. She held a sweet demeanor and saw the best in people. She saw the good in Amber when there wasn't much there. You couldn't help but love the girl.

"Oh Amber! Did your mother lose that number already?" she heard through the phone, "I know she is so busy."

"Why yes! She asked me to get it from you again." Amber lied.

She read off the number and Amber scribbled it into her phone book. "Brenda will be so glad to hear from you. She's been missing her friends, but she'll be back soon. Her aunt is feeling better and won't need her help much longer."

"Wonderful, Mrs. Wheeler. I can't wait to talk to her. Good speaking with you as well. Yes, bu-bye!"

Amber shook her head. An aunt needing help, a trip to Europe, visiting relatives out west, these were the stories used when girls got in trouble. Society expected it and all of them just looked away and accepted it. The truth was never spoken of and when the girl came back, everyone acted like it never happened. Even though the girl was not looked at in the same way. Her reputation preceded her. She was easy, plain and simple.

Amber dialed the number. An unfamiliar voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hello. May I speak to Brenda Wheeler? My name is Amber Von Tussle."

"Just a minute."

Amber could hear voices in the background. She heard Brenda say she didn't want to talk. The other voice insisted. Suddenly Brenda's voice burst on the line.

"Amber, tell your mother that I haven't made a decision yet. I just don't know if I canâ€¦."

"Good!" Amber interrupted.

There was silence.

"Amber.." she sniffed.

"Brenda, don't say another word. Meet with me. We'll work this out." She spoke fast.

"I can't."

"Yes you can. Tell me where you are. Whatever she told you to do can't be right. Let me see you Brenda. I swear I won't tell anyone. Please" she begged.

She could hear Brenda cover the phone. When she came back her voice was insanely happy, "My aunt says you can come here if you promise to visit me through the kitchen window. Okay?"

Leaning out a window hid her delicate condition. Amber couldn't help but think how stupid this was. "That would be great!" she replied. She wrote the address down in her book. She knew where this was. Not too far from where Brenda actually lived. Amber had been there a million times. Just never with a mission to drive her on.

10. Chapter 10

X

Brenda smiled while tears ran down her face when Amber arrived. She wanted to hug her so badly. She actually missed this girl and knew how hard it had been on her. "Brenda, it's so good to see you." She placed her open palm on the screen and Brenda did the same. It was as close as they could get.

They talked for a while about the old times and dancing together. The new music, new dances and who was dating who. Her aunt sat at the table behind them. She listened to make sure that nothing was said that could jeopardize Brenda's secret. That secret that everyone knew. Finally, the aunt seemed satisfied that this was just girls gossiping about other kids. She excused herself to the bathroom.

When she walked away, Amber spoke quickly. "Brenda, what did my mother ask you to do?"

Brenda looked shocked. "You don't know?" Amber shook her head. "She wants me to talk to a reporter from WBAL. She wants me to name Corny Collins as this baby's father. If I do it, she will pay for me to go to college. I'll be set." Brenda looked down.

She knew it. It was just too obvious. "You don't want to do this Brenda. You don't want to go to college. You want to get to Eddy. Your baby needs it's father." She exclaimed.

"My parents want me to do it." She sobbed, "They want me to lie. I guess it looks better that a girl was taken advantage by an older man, than the fact that she loves her boyfriend"

"You can't do this to Corny." She stated simply.

"Amber, you don't understand. If I get that money, I can go. I can take the first payment and say that I'm signing up for classes. That money will buy my ticket. I'll be gone before they even know it. I have my passport from my trip to Europe last year. Before they

realize it, we'll be gone." She caressed her abdomen and smiled.

"You don't have the time. When is the baby coming?" Amber scrambled for a plan.

"Six weeks."

"You won't be able to sign up until fall. Who's going to have your baby? Where will that baby be?" Amber whispered as Brenda stared. It seemed like a good plan butâ€|.Amber interrupted her thoughts, "How much money do you need?"

"Seven hundred dollars."

Amber had it. It was her own college money but she would make it up. Amber looked at her watch. The bank closed in an hour. If she hurried, she could make it home, get her bank book and pull the money. She turned to Brenda. "If I can get you that money, will you tell my mother no? Will you go and not look back?"

"Amber, you can't do thisâ€|.."

"Yes. I can. And I will." Amber kissed her palm and put it back up onto the screen. "Tell me Brenda, will you?"

"Of course!" She kissed her palm as well and pushed it against Amber's.

"I'll be back."

Her little car couldn't move fast enough. She ran up the steps and pulled her drawer open to retrieve the bank book. She snatched the book and a few pictures. She was running out of time. She had to be quick. She would fill out the withdrawal slip as she drove. Into the bank and back out. It would all be simple, no one would know. Brenda would be happy, Eddy would be happy, Mother would be livid when Brenda was gone, but she could deal with that. This was going to work out.

She walked up to the counter and spoke with the teller. The girl was new and nervous. Amber tried to set her mind at ease. Take your time and it will be okay. As long as Amber was in that bank with money being counted into her hand, she would be fine.

She counted the money twice and Amber stuffed it into an envelope. She ran out the door.

Suddenly, the teller's supervisor pointed at her work. In order for that girl to get money from this account, she needed another signature on the slip, her supervisor said. This was not a mistake she could make again. The girl was lucky, Mrs. Von Tussle was a very good customer. They would call her at her new job and inform her of the mistake. Everything would be alright.

For the teller, that is.

Amber arrived back at Brenda's aunt's. Could she see her one more time, please? She wanted to give her these photos which Amber had gathered from home. She would meet her in the back. Amber made her

way to the window and pushed the photos with the envelope under the screen to Brenda's waiting hand.

"Take care of yourself Brenda. All my love." She blew her a kiss and knew she would never see her again. She was sad, but in the long run, it was best for all concerned. Brenda deserved to be happy, Corny deserved to be happy. Seven hundred dollars was a small price to pay for it. Amber felt quite satisfied with herself as she headed home. She had absolutely no clue what this evening held for her. None at all.

11. Chapter 11

XI.

Amber was reading when she heard the door slam. Hmmm, her mother was early. That was odd. Most nights with the new job, she came in well after Amber had fallen asleep. She liked it that way.

"Amber." Her mother sang up the steps, "I have to talk to youâ€|"

Her stomach flopped. This was the sweet lilting voice of entrapment. Mother used it when she didn't want Amber to know how much trouble she was in. Fear grasped her. She found out, somehow she found out. This was not a situation that she wanted to be in. Her first impulse was to run. But she knew she would never make it past her. She looked around. Hide. Her best bet was to hide and hope she couldn't find her before she could get away. Amber silently made her way to the closet. She made herself as small as possible and covered herself with clothes. She scarcely breathed.

"Amber, honey." She continued as she made her way up the steps, "I want to speak with you. I know you're here. Your car is here. Come on and see Mother."

She could hear footsteps in her room, they stopped by the closet, but Velma circled and went on. "Amber, I got a call from the bank today. You made a withdrawal without Mother's permission. Naughty, naughty little girlâ€|." She padded out to the hallway.

"And I spoke with Brenda's mother, Amber" she sang as she flipped on the bathroom light across the hall, "Our little Brenda is missing Amber. Right after a visit from you, she says. Brenda's mommy wants to speak with you tooâ€|."

Amber heard her head down the hall to her own room. She heard her pull the closet door open and at that point felt it was her break. "Mother wants to know why you're working against her, Honey. Just come on out and we can have a talk." She continued to sing. Amber threw off the clothes and pulled herself out. She raced as fast as she could to the staircase. As her foot touched the second step but she felt Velma's fingers in her hair. She yanked her back and onto the carpet. Amber was stunned as her mother stood over her.

"Mother, please." She begged, "Please just listen."

"Now Amber, you haven't been listening much to me, have you?" Velma reached down and grabbed her by the arm. "You little bitch, you've

been working against me all along!" She pulled her to her knees with a resounding twist. Amber gasped.

"You played me for the last time, girl." Velma backhanded her.

She ignored the sting and scrambled as fast as she could back to her room. "Mother please, I can explain everything!"

"I don't need your explanations. You've always been against me." Velma screeched, "You've been with him, don't think I didn't know it. I've seen you look at him. All these years. You've wanted him and he hasn't given you the time of day. Giving it to you now little girl? How does that Asshole taste?"

Amber hopped onto her bed as Velma lunged. She grabbed Amber's foot but got a slipper instead. She threw it, but missed. "You've pushed me Amber and I've been patient. I'm not going to be anymore."

She saw an escape as her mother picked up a book from her desk and it flew by her. She sprinted for the door but Velma body checked and she slammed against the wall.

Velma's hands went to her throat as she held her. "No matter how good he is, is he worth this?"

Velma's voice became low and soft as she leaned into her, "You see darling, I brought you into this world and I can take you back out." Her fingers clenched. Amber couldn't breathe. She closed her eyes and felt for something, anything to end this. Her hands touched the desk lamp and with all her waning strength, she smashed it against Velma's head. She didn't think but pushed past the screaming woman. She grabbed her purse on the side table and pulled the front door open. Velma was not far behind, screaming threats and obscenities. She reached the car at the same time Amber slammed and locked the door. Amber was shaking so badly her fingers worked to get the keys into the ignition. The car started and she looked at her mother screaming at her through the window.

"You will regret this Amber. I'm your mother, you are nothing without me," she bellowed with mascara and blood streaming down her face. "You and Collins are finished. You will regret this!"

Her words trailed away as Amber drove. Amber wanted to cry but was just too terrified for any other emotion to slip in. She had to think. She was in pajamas, she had no shoes. There was nothing open to buy anything. She had to go somewhere. The police? Amber knew that Mother had friends there. She didn't know which one of those men would just put her into a police car and send her right back home. That's not it.

She pulled the car into a church parking lot. Safe in the shadows, she looked at herself in the rearview mirror. She didn't look too bad. Her hair was a mess and of course she had no makeup but all in all, she made it through unscathed. Well except the bruises, she thought as she tilted her chin. Her fingers touched the marks. They were easily covered and nothing to worry about. The cause of those marks was something of a concern, but the marks were not. Suddenly, a tear ran down her face and then another. She took a deep breath. It hurt. Her mind wandered, what was she going to do now. Basically, she was homeless. In fact, this car was probably reported stolen by now.

She reached for her handkerchief and saw a piece of paper. Motormouth Maybelle's Record Shop. Well, she really didn't have much of a choice did she? There was no where else to go.

Amber drove onto the highway north and wiped the tears from her eyes. In some ways, this was her moment of awakening. She had nothing left. She would never be the same.

12. Chapter 12

XII

The shop was closed when she arrived. She studied the layout. She knew that they lived above the store but how to get to those glowing windows was the question. Amber grabbed her purse and opened the door. It would probably be the last time she saw this car too. She looked around it and grabbed a bag, stuffing any belongings she could find into it. It seemed to her that there was some finality to the act. Everything that was here was her mother's. Now she was on her own.

She slammed the door closed, not even bothering to lock it. She hurried down the alley next to the shop and found a door with a mailbox hung close by. She knocked. There was no answer. She looked around and saw a bell. She pushed on it twice and waited. Oh please let this be the place. She looked around and it sunk in where she was at. If she didn't find them, what would happen to her? A new fear weighed on her mind as the door opened. Seaweed looked shocked. "Amber?"

Relief washed over her. "Oh my God. Seaweed I need to see your Mother, please." Her knees gave out and she fell against the jam. He steadied her.

"You, okay?" he asked as he slipped an arm around her.

"Please, I just need to see her. Is she here?" Amber asked weakly.

"No, she's at my Auntie's but I'll call her. Come on in." He took the bag and led her to the stairs. How could she have thought so little of these people? They were so kind, so concerned. She looked at him. "Seaweed, I'm sorry for everything I've ever done to you."

He squinted at her, suddenly coming into the light, "You didn't doâ€|â€|hey, what happened to your neck?"

"Nothing. Nothing really."

He knew those marks. When he was a kid his uncle was attacked in his dry cleaners. The thief had a bat but his uncle had two good hands. When the man was taken away by the ambulance, he had those same marks. Someone hurt this girl.

They were greeted by Inez and Penny. Inez looked at her in disgust. "What's SHE doing here?"

"Shut up, Inez," Seaweed snapped, "Penny, can you come here?" He put Amber down in their big recliner and pulled Penny aside. "She hurt, I

have to get my Momma here. Can you sit with her while I call?"

Penny nodded and sat by Amber. She looked at her, robed and shoeless. Her hair was eschewed. Amber looked at her, "Hi Penny."

Penny's eyes were wide, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. How are you?" She asked as she looked around. Inez shot her an evil look. Okay, she deserved it, but didn't need it right now.

Seaweed came back in. "Momma will be here in a minute. Amber can I get you anything?"

"Just your mother."

Maybelle could be heard running up the steps. The door flew open and she looked at her. "Aw Honey, what happened to you?" She cooed as she embraced her.

Amber couldn't hold it. She sobbed. "She found out. I'm in so much trouble."

Maybelle lifted her chin and surveyed the bruises. "Your mother?" Amber nodded.

"I can't go home anymore. I have no where to go."

"You can stay right here." Maybelle turned to Inez who looked with wide eyes and an open mouth, "Go get some sheets and pull out that bed. She'll be here for a while."

Inez pushed past them. "Sorry, Amber" she said quietly as she made her way down the hall and Amber whispered a thank you. She clung to Maybelle.

"Come on. Come and tell me what happened." Maybelle said as she led her to the kitchen.

Maybelle made tea and Amber relayed all that happened that day. Seaweed, Penny and Inez listened intently. She had no clue how her mother found out, but her anger far outweighed any reason she had. Amber believed with all her heart that if she had stayed, she wouldn't have made it out. She was sure the police were looking for her. For the car if nothing else. Maybelle walked to the phone and placed a call. Her nephew was a cop, no one would find Amber here. She would be safe for a while.

"Amber, you should talk to the Police about what happened to you." Maybelle said strongly.

"She owns them." She sighed, "I'm not sure I can go there."

"I'll get my nephew here tomorrow and he can file the report." Maybelle replied. There was a pause. "We have to call Corny. What if she's there?"

Amber panicked, "Oh my God! Maybelle call him! I'm not sure what she'll do."

Maybelle picked up the phone.

13. Chapter 13

**_For a certain someone, she knows who she is, I'm uploading a few chapters
> Hopefully, this will help you escape from reality,
lady!**

XIII

The phone was ringing and there was a pounding on the front door as he stood. He didn't know which to answer first when he heard a resounding, "Open up! It's the Police." Coming from the front. That was first priority.

He opened the door and two officers pushed past him. "Good evening, Gentlemen!" he flashed his best smile, "What can I help you with?"

"We're looking for a girl. She stole a car and assaulted her mother. The mother said she may be here." The officer relayed.

Corny looked puzzled, "Well if you find her here, let me know. I'd like to meet her."

One of the men came out of Corny's room. "No one's here."

"Or here." another one said.

"Okay Mr. Collins, looks like it's clear here. Sorry to have bothered you." The officer said as he extended a hand, "If this girl should show up here, we'd appreciate it if you give us a call at this number." He held out a card and a picture of Amber. WHAT!

"This is the girl?" Corny asked.

"Yes. Her mother is worried about her. If you see her, please call us."

"Of course. Have a good night, Officer. Sorry I couldn't help." He said as he closed the door.

What was this about? Stole a car? Okay he could see the assault, lots of people would volunteer for that, but what pushed Amber to do it? The telephone interrupted his thoughts.

"Hello?" he said before the phone even hit his ear.

"Corny it's Maybelle." He heard.

"Maybelle the police were just here. Their looking for Amber. Have you heardâ€¦|..?"

"She's here."

"THERE?" Now he was confused. "What is she doing with you?"

"Corny, can you come here? It's a long story. Too long to explain

over the phone."

He looked around. "Yeah, let me get dressed. I'll be there in a few."

Maybelle looked at Amber. "The police were there. She's looking for you."

Amber knew it. "What are you going to tell him?" she asked.

"What do you want me to tell him?" She asked.

She wanted her to tell him everything. She wanted to tell him how she felt. That she would do anything for him. That she loâ€|

"Just tell him the truth without the details. My mother was angry. She flipped out. I had no where else to go." She stated.

"He's not gonna buy that. Amber look at where you are. You are not known to hang out down here. He's gonna think something's up. Something we're not telling him."

Amber threw up her hands. "I don't know Maybelle. I don't know what to say. You handle it." She wanted to escape. Warm water streaming down her body looked better than ever. "Can I use your shower?" she asked suddenly.

"Don't worry Honey, I'll see what I can do. Let me get you a towel." Maybelle headed down the hallway and the kids stared.

"I have to get Penny home, she's late." Seaweed said suddenly, "She gonna be in almost as much trouble as you." Amber heard her mother was a bit freaky herself. She didn't envy her. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I'm fine. Thank you for everything." She said sincerely as they stood. "Sorry to be such a botherâ€|."

"No Amber" Inez said with a smile, "Friends help each other when they are in trouble."

Her words were gold. Amber turned toward her, "Thank you. You don't know how much that means to me." She tears welled in her eyes.

"Go get a shower. You look a fright, Amber Von Tussle." Inez winked at her.

"Here Honey, you go get in that shower. Let the water wash it all away." Maybelle said, "You'll feel better after. Second door on the right."

Amber made her way past Seaweed's room with sports heroes on the wall, then Inez's, bathed in pink with ballerinas, much like her own. The bathroom was zebra striped. Amber had never seen so much gold. She liked it. Gold fixtures and towel holders. Gold accents everywhere. It was tiny compared to her bathroom at home, but was heaven at this moment.

She stripped off the robe and baby doll pjs. She had to laugh. Good God, she didn't even own underwear anymore. No shoes, nothing. Back

home she had closets full. So many dresses that half were stored for the winters. What in the world would she do? She had seven hundred dollars in her hand today. If she wouldn't have given it to Brenda, she wouldn't be in this mess. Well, life is strange that way sometimes.

She started the shower, adjusted the temperature and got in. It felt great. She stuck her hair under the stream. Had she ever washed her own hair? No more beauty shop appointments, that was for sure. Guess she would have to learn how to do it sometime. The shampoo smelled of flowers and Amber spilled too much into her hand. She plopped some on her hair and rubbed the rest on her body. It fuzzed up pretty easily. She tried to tilt her head back to rinse but the bruises stopped her. She flipped her head forward instead. Was her hair really that long? She stood and felt around. Seemed clean and rinsed. She stood back up, water streaming over her and she let her mind drift. Was this all worth it?

14. Chapter 14

XIV

Maybelle opened the door. Corny looked at her. "What the hell is going on?"

"A lot. I have to talk to you. This is bigger than you can imagine." She said with all seriousness. She took his hand and led him up to the kitchen. Inez waved as he went by. She listened down the hallway and pulled a chair next to his.

"Where is she?" he asked

"She's in the shower." Maybelle began. "This has to be quick because she doesn't want you to know any of it. No questions, just listen. I have too much to tell you for you to interrupt, got it?"

He focused on her and nodded.

Maybelle relayed the story from beginning to end. Corny sat shocked. "Why would she do this?" he asked, not completely understanding the motivation.

"All I can say is that she must really care about you," Maybelle smiled as they heard the water stop.

He didn't speak, he had nothing to say. Why? Why had she done it? What did she want from him?

Amber's turbaned head peeped into the kitchen. Her eyes grew wide when she saw him. "I'm sorry. I was wondering if you had a spare toothbrush." She tried to stay calm and be matter of fact.

He looked at the prominent bruising on her neck. That had to hurt. "Geez Amber are you okay?" He stood and embraced her. She didn't want to touch him, she felt totally naked. With nothing but a robe between her skin and him, she stiffened. But he didn't let go, "I'm so sorry." He whispered. Her arms moved around him. Maybelle saw her eyes close and she smiled. She must really care, an awful lot.

He lifted her chin and viewed the purple marks in the light. "That looks nasty. Did you talk to the police?"

She tried to look down but he wouldn't let her. "No. I can't."

"Amber look at me." Those eyes stared down at her, "You have to. She needs to pay for this. You don't deserve it. No one does."

"I know, butâ€¦."

Maybelle interrupted, "We're going to handle that as soon as we can. She needs to talk to someone on this side of town. Too many officers know Velma on hers."

"Too true." He released her and led her to a chair, "Come on and sit down."

She looked at Maybelle. What did she tell him? Well whatever it was, it was done now. His eyes didn't leave her and in some ways it made her very uncomfortable. She looked down.

"So what happens now?" he began, "What will you do?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it." She said honestly.

"Butâ€¦": he began.

Maybelle didn't want him to pressure her. He wanted answers that she could not give. She watched Amber struggle and tears were in her eyes. She somehow knew that there was no thought put into what the child had done. It was pure instinct that drove her. Instinct to protect someone she cared deeply about. "We'll see that she is taken care of Corny. She's not going anywhere but here. We'll think about tomorrow when tomorrow comes. Right now, we all need some sleep. Amber, the sofa bed is ready for you. Corny, I'll have to see you tomorrow."

That was that. Amber smiled and said goodnight. She looked back at him as she moved to the doorway. "Please be careful" she said to him, "My mother can beâ€¦..Well you know."

He thought he knew how she could be. Now looking at the results of her anger, he wasn't quite sure.

She asked Inez for a hairbrush and pulled the towel off her head. It was a golden matt. Inez returned and handed her a pick. "Sorry this is all we've got." Inez shrugged.

Amber looked at it. "What is it? What do I do with it?"

Inez smiled, "Let me do it." She knelt on the bed and plopped down next to her. "I've always wanted to play with a white girl's hair. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, thanks." Amber smiled. She may just like it here.

Corny headed down the stairs. He turned to Maybelle at the bottom.

"Anything she needs, you tell me." He said as he kissed her cheek, "I'll take care of it." He turned and left. She stared after him. Hopefully, this man knew what a gift he had been given. Maybe he could see who really cared about him all along.

Corny drove and his mind raced. This had been going on since the pageant. No one told him, no one let on. Amber had walked into that studio every other week. She didn't fuss, or demand. She took her new found position with a grace that he never thought he'd see. In the long run, he had been so wrapped up in his own feelings, he didn't pay much attention to her. She wasn't causing problems, the other kids left her alone and things just happened. He searched his memory for a sign that this was unfolding, but didn't find it. He sighed.

So why would she do it? He had to be honest with himself. If Maybelle wasn't backing her, he would be extremely suspicious of this. In many ways, he looked at Amber as an extension of Velma, her right hand, so to speak. But he was the one who told her that she wasn't her mother. That she did nothing wrong. He was right.

But, never did he think that statement would lead to the danger she put herself into. She lost everything because of it. What would she do now? She had nothing and no idea how to work for what she needed. How would she survive? There wasn't an easy solution that jumped at him. He just continued to drive.

15. Chapter 15

XV

Amber stared at the clothes presented to her. Suddenly she knew why this community got along so well in the face of adversity. They stuck together. They helped each other. They provided the things they needed. They gave without expecting anything in return. And Amber was now part of this community. She may have been the salt in the pepper shaker, but she was there now.

She spent the first day in a caftan that belonged to Maybelle. She tripped on the length more than once. Inez was close to the same shoe size, so the outfit was complete somewhat, with slippers from the back of her closet. Amber hid in the apartment, wondering what she would do about school and how to get her books. When Maybelle's nephew arrived to file the police report, at first she was hesitant. No matter what, she loved her mother. She didn't want her in trouble. After hearing the whole story, the man insisted that it needed to be done. There were such things as "Protective orders" that would keep Velma away from her without anymore repercussions. Maybelle said that all of them could be in trouble if she didn't take that step. She could only be protected so long. A white girl running away and hiding in a colored neighborhood would bring no good to anyone. Even the fact that she had turned eighteen last month, would mean nothing if Velma pushed the point. Amber knew she was right. She held her chin up as the man took pictures. He would handle it from there.

Seaweed brought the council members home after school. Kids that she rarely gave the time of day to, sat around the kitchen table, looking at schedules and devising a plan. Amber would ride the bus to school

with these kids and would not be alone her entire day. In each of Amber's classes she had at least one of them there. They would watch and make sure she did not run into anyone she didn't want to see. Velma's name was not spoken, but all of them knew who they were watching for.

Inez stared bringing in bags from downstairs. Things were arriving sometime after those kids went home. Shoes and dresses, slippers and stockings. She even spied a leopard spotted bra. Amber was giddy. Inez handed her a pack of panties from the 5&10 up the street. They were bigger than Amber wore and had the Days of the Week sew in them. Amber went to her purse and tried to hand Inez one of the few dollars she had. Inez waved it away. Momma said that she was not to take a thing. We all helped as we could.

She looked at the colors and fabrics. None of them were things that had been picked for her in the past. Vibrant oranges, creams, browns and mustards. How would she look in this pallet? Did she care? She chose a simple jumper with a white blouse. Suddenly, she felt like she could make it.

Inez spent hours playing with Amber's hair. She even had a couple friends show up. They oooed and ahhhed over the smoothness of it, feeling the silky locks. Amber asked to feel theirs. It was coarse and curly. Inez showed her how they could twist it and it would stay in place even without pins. Now Amber was just as fascinated. They were different but the same. It was a whole new world here.

She drifted down to the record shop sometime after the younger girls left. It was a different atmosphere than the first time she had been there. People smiled at her. They showed her records and played different cuts from the lps. She listened to the music and watched the kids move. They were amazing. The music moved through them, not around them. No wonder Corny wanted to bring these kids into the Council. She was so caught up in her own talent that she never saw theirs. She sure could learn some moves from them.

She watched Seaweed collect money and work the register. It was very old fashioned but did it's job. When the bill came to a dollar thirty seven, he touched the dollar button, the thirty cent button and the seven cent button. He pushed them down, a bell rang and the drawer opened. He would then take the cash and count down to the amount, giving the exact change. She studied him doing this over and over. Finally, she asked if she could try. He stood by her as she copied his work. He smiled as she succeeded. Maybe Momma could give her a job. She laughed, feeling quite proud of her accomplishment. She had never been on this side of the register in her whole life!

Word got to her that Corny rearranged the dance schedule so she would dance the same week as Seaweed. He didn't want her coming in with Maybelle and Inez alone.

She was to be there the next day. She wanted to send the word back that she wasn't coming. She knew that her mother would be watching, waiting to see her. Waiting to see her watch him. It made her stomach churn. She tried to talk to Maybelle about it, but the woman was steadfast in the resolve that Amber should continue her life. Security was on alert, Velma couldn't make it in if she tried. With the protection order being processed, Maybelle was sure Velma was smart enough not to press her luck. She had power, but not in the

WYZZ studios. Amber would be safe there.

Amber looked through the dresses as the time drew near. She stared at one particular hanger. There was a straight skirted dress that bordered on cocktail. It was satin, although not particularly shiny. Chocolate brown and flared at the bottom. Tiny flecks of red highlighted the material. Her mother never let her even consider a dress without crinolines. She was too young for such clothing. She had a problem with Amber growing up. The frilly dresses with huge bows filled her closet. Not anymore. She snatched the dress and slipped it on. It zipped without a problem. She surveyed herself in the mirror. Guess who grew up, Mother?

Her white dance shoes were still in her drawer at the studio and wouldn't match. She threw her eyes to the ceiling at her own thoughts. Her red slides would be perfect with this, but that didn't matter anymore. She had lovely brown stilettos to travel in and the white would do for the dance. She felt like she could handle the anything as she pulled the rollers out of her hair. She was ready to take on the world.

As she walked into the studio, she felt lighter than air. Heads turned as she walked in talking to Inez. She was sure these kids heard what had happened, especially about Brenda, but Amber ignored all of them. She traveled to her vanity and studied her reflection. One could still see the discoloration, but the pancake stick had covered most of it. She loved the small red corkscrews that Inez scattered in her hair. She looked more like a vanilla version of the colored girls than herself. She liked it. Perhaps mother wouldn't know who she was at all. If she missed the roll call, she might miss her completely. It made her smile.

Corny made his way to the podium and his eyes swept the room. He did a double take. Who was that? She turned and their eyes met before she looked down. His eyes followed her as she made her way to her spot in line.

Maybelle watched him look. She wanted to giggle at his reaction. "Nice, huh?" she said to his wide eyes.

"Nice." He repeated without looking her way.

"She's grown up so much. Remember when she was just a skinny kid?" she asked still not capturing his attention.

"Um-hm" he said thoughtlessly.

She let him have his moment, then touched his arm. "How about you come for Sunday dinner this week? Just like old times?"

His eyes finally focused on her, bright and sparkling, "I'll be there." He replied before the first beats of the theme music started. He took his spot and looked at the camera. As professional as always. Even gobsmacked the man could pull it together. Maybelle beamed.

16. Chapter 16

****_Anyone who has been to a Sunday dinner with a black family (ours**

is many colors) will recognize it here.

> Thank you so much for the reviews at this busy time of year. And the favorites of course!**

XVI

Amber was confident, even though the show went off without a hitch, that her mother would not let this die. She would be back. Somehow, somewhere she would get back at her for what she had done. It wasn't enough to have her abandoned and alone. She needed more. Amber knew in her heart of hearts that this is the way life was. Velma didn't take things lightly and a simple protection order would not stand in her way. Amber was apprehensive but didn't want to think about it now. Now she wanted to think about the events that were about to unfold. She looked to the pot of green leaves that simmered in the pot. They smelled great but she had no clue what they were. Maybelle told her to stir, so she stirred. They were to cook until the liquid was gone and Amber needed to pay attention. So she stirred and she thought. What in the world would she say to this man? What did he know? Maybe she didn't want to know what he knew. Maybe it didn't matter at all.

She looked around the kitchen and took in the love she saw there. Women turned out cornbread and baked chicken. Girls chatted as they mixed macaroni and cheese and counted forks. All of them were loud, boisterous and happy. None of them seemed to be working, although a meal was being prepared. They were socializing and gossiping like they sat around a tea. Amber had never seen anything like it. At home, meals were something to be avoided. Salads were prepared well ahead of the time they were eaten. Never sitting and eating, just on the run. And never, absolutely never, would a smell as lovely as a baking sweet potato pie be swirling through her house. She was dying to taste that. Amber realized that even when her life went on, and she no longer had to be dependant on these people, she would return to the love in this kitchen. It filled her completely and she would never give it up again.

"How are those greens doing, little girl?" Maybelle asked over her shoulder. She tilted the pan and looked inside. The liquid had reduced down significantly. "They look about done. Here slip them into this dish and we'll finish them up."

Amber tipped the pot, scraped the leaves and a large bone fell with a clunk. "Clean the meat off that bone, Honey. Mix it in and they're done." Maybelle instructed. Amber grabbed a fork and pulled as much meat off the knuckle as she could. She mixed it in, added a serving spoon and walked it out to the table.

The sleep sofa and chairs were moved back to accommodate the large table. The kids would be eating in the kitchen, before the adults so they could go on to music and board games. They were already filling plates there. She walked back to the kitchen to volunteer for another job. Women were bringing serving platters and arranging plates. There was nothing left to do.

Suddenly the doorbell rang and Amber heard his voice coming up the stairs, "Hey, sorry I'm late. Did I miss all the work?"

Maybelle released her plate of chicken onto the table and gave him a hug. "Don't you always?" She kissed his cheek, "Grab a seat, you get

first pick."

His eyes met Amber's. "I want to sit by the blonde." He laughed. "Where's the white section?"

A large man made his way to Corny and slapped him on the back. "You're in our part of town now. Of course it's in the back!" They all laughed, "How you been, Man? Haven't seen you in a while."

"Oh I've been fine Georgie, it's good to be back!" He replied as he hugged the man, "You didn't get to that pie before me, now did you?"

Georgie looked at him, "Helen still has it locked in the kitchen. If I get served first, you'll have to rassle me for it. You ready?"

"I'll take you down for pie. Hey Helen!" he yelled out, "I have first dibs on your pie. Otherwise you'll be missing a husband!"

She was coming through the door, slipping off her apron, as he spoke. "Then can I have you, you sweet talkin' man?"

Georgie yelled a "Hey!" while Helen gave him a hug and he kissed her cheek. "How you been, Baby?" she asked.

"I've been yearning for some Sweet Potato Pie. No one makes them like you, Lady." He cooed.

"You know just what to sayâ€¦." She smiled at him.

Amber stood silent as he was greeted again and again. He was part of this family, plain and simple. Now she was too. She felt like she was going to burst and faint all at the same time. He finally looked up and made his way over to her. He cocked his head.

"Which one's your chair?" he smiled at her.

She grabbed the chair in front of her. He pulled it out and she sat, then he took the next. People gathered and all eyes turned to the Pastor at the head of the table. He stood and everyone joined hands. He took hers without looking up.

"Oh Lord, for what we are about to receive, may we be truly thankful. For good food and good friends, we thank you Jesus. Amen.'

All replied, "Amen!" He didn't let her hand go right away, but looked her way instead. She smiled and looked down.

Food was passed and conversations commenced. They didn't say much to each other. He was the center of attention for everyone else. Maybelle watched them from across the table. This time, next time or some time thereafter, they would talk. His questions would be answered and her feelings would be known. They had all the time in the world. Maybelle was sure of it.

Long after the party broke up, Amber laid on the sofa and could not sleep. Her mind drifted. She had horrible thoughts of losing all of this. She tried to be as quiet as she possibly could as she made her way to the kitchen. She put the tea kettle on and sat. Her head in her hands, she tried so hard to push the thoughts away. Of the friends, of the fun, of him. She only had a couple more months. After high school graduation she was off the show, and he would be on his own. At least others knew about it and all of them could watch his back. Her mother could try, but all in all, people would look with suspicion at any accusation that came at him. She felt that she did all she could do. Soon it would be over. Maybe all of it. She didn't want to think about losing her new found friends or never seeing him again. It was so hard. But in the long run, she had to be an adult and go on with her life. There was nothing else she could do.

She put her head down on the table and the thoughts of his goodbye entered her mind. He stayed for a while, drinking coffee and talking. People began to gather their things and thank Maybelle for a wonderful meal. He hugged everyone. Then walked to her. He put his arms around her and she felt all his breath leave his body. He looked down at her for what seemed like an eternity. She looked into those eyes and easily could have stayed there forever. Finally, he kissed her forehead.

"Thank you." He said and then he was gone.

Lord, it was much more difficult than she ever imagined. To have him that close and yet, in reality, not near her at all.

"Honey, are you okay?" Maybelle whispered.

"Oh I'm sorry Maybelle, I didn't mean to wake you. Yes I'm fine." She stood and turned off the tea kettle.

"Do you want to talk?" Maybelle asked her, handing her a second teacup.

"If you want. I'm not sure there's much to say." She replied as she dropped a bag into Maybelle's cup.

They sat silently over the steaming tea. Maybelle studied her. She looked so concerned, so uneasy.

"Did you have a good time today?" Maybelle asked breaking the silence.

"Marvelous! I swear, I've never eaten that much! It was all so good." She smiled

They fell back to silence and Amber sighed. Maybelle looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"I just have a feeling that this is all going to end. I'm going to wake up tomorrow and it will all be gone." She replied.

Maybelle looked at her puzzled, "What will be gone?"

"All of you, how great you all have been to me." She began, "Good things don't last long in my life. I mean, the things I have stuck

around, but never the good times." She put her hand over Maybelle's, "I just want you to know that this has been the very best time of my life. I was so wrong about all of you," Amber looked down and blushed, "All the colored peopleâ€¦..no one has ever been as kind to me as you have. I'm so embarrassed by the way I acted andâ€¦|.."

Maybelle took her hand, "Now you just forget about it. We all make mistakes in our life. What is important is that we learn from them. Now you know, right?"

Amber nodded and still didn't look up.

"You're family now. Nothing is going away. You belong with us." She lifted Amber's chin, "Okay?"

Amber had tears in her eyes, "Thank you so much." She threw her arms around Maybelle and she patted her back.

They sat in the glow of their mutual affection. Maybelle watched her face. This poor girl had given up so much, she had no idea what she would do. Her face grew darker as Maybelle watched her. There was more to this than feeling bad about past actions. Her fear included losing him. Maybelle had observed them during dinner today. They played a silent game of tag. He would have a conversation with someone across the table, and she would gaze at him. She would speak to someone else and he would beam at her every word. Both of them deserved to be happy. God knows, this child did enough for the man.

"Amber, why don't you just tell the man how you feel about him?" Maybelle blurted out.

Her eyes grew wide and she gasped, "I, uh. I don't know what you mean."

Maybelle had to laugh, "Girl, do you know how obvious you are with him? Forget about the whole idea that you risked life and limb to block your Mother's rage, you can't stay in the same room without blushing. You can't take your eyes off him. Amber you have to be honest with your self. It won't do you, or him, any good to deny it."

"Oh Maybelle, that's just positively silly" Amber laughed, blushing the entire time, "Corny is a very sweet man and all of us think he's wonderful. You do. Of course, Iâ€¦|.."

Maybelle cut her off, "I haven't done what you've done Amber. None of us have. And you can sit here telling me that you feel the same as I do, but I can tell you, that he doesn't look at me the way he looks at you."

Amber snapped to attention. Then she looked down. "What did you tell him? About what happened, about what I did?"

"I told him what he needed to know. I told him the truth."

Amber smiled, "Of course!" she her eyes lifted, "He's grateful. That's so nice. I would be too. That's so Corny, to think about someone who helped him out. He's just the best and he

sureâ€¦|.."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Maybelle gave her a look, "You need to just stop Amber. Stop denying what's right in front of you. I do know him better than you do. And I am telling you that it's not only gratitude he's throwing your way. I would bet on it."

Amber's eyes were wide. "But Maybelle he's so much older than I am. I'm just a kid to him."

Maybelle squinted one eye and shook her head, "An eighteen year old kid. How old was your mother when she had you? I was seventeen when I had Seaweed. And don't even bring up that age difference. Mr. Stubbs was twelve years older than me, may God rest his soul. There is no difference where love is concerned."

Oh Amber didn't want her to say that word. The "L" word. She didn't want to go there.

Her own father had been eighteen years older than her mother, if he was actually her father, that is. So she knew that this was a feeble excuse. She just couldn't take that step. Maybelle was confident, but Amber was far from it. Her fantasies were enough for her. She had lived on fantasy her whole life, first dreaming that a fairy Godmother would give her a family like other girls had, then a knight in shining armor would whisk her away from her mother. None of it was real, but it helped her make it through. She didn't want her dreams ruined with reality. At this point, it was all she had.

"Maybelle I can'tâ€¦|."

"Of course you can." She said simply, "You have to."

Amber thought for a minute. This lady wasn't letting her out of it. The best she could do was delay. "After graduation. Maybe then."

Maybelle smiled. Corny wasn't going to make it that long. He would say something to her if they could get some time alone. But at least she had put the bug in the girl's ear. Maybelle wanted this to work. She wanted to see them together. For both of their sakes.

18. Chapter 18

Happy New Year!

XVIII

Amber looked at him differently as well. She would catch him looking at her and he would smile. She could feel herself blush. He touched her as he walked by. Did he do that before this whole thing started? She couldn't be sure. She wanted to say yes, but she never remembered tingling from his touch. Maybelle could be right, or she could just want her to be right. Being her week to dance, the first week after the big dinner, made her see things the way she wanted to see them. The way she hoped to see them.

They practiced "The Locomotion" as Little Eva sang. It was a fun

happy dance. As usual, Inez was right in the front. At one time Amber resented it. Now she loved the girl. It was funny how just a year ago, the color of her skin and her age would have been cause to ignore her. Now they felt like the sisters that neither of them ever had. Inez would sneak out to the living room at night and they would giggle about how dreamy the latest movie stars were. She would throw an arm around Amber as if she were her best friend. She even told her that she had always wanted a sister and Seaweed just wouldn't do. That made Amber laugh uncontrollably and they ended up waking Maybelle. Maybelle threatened a switch on both of their be-hinds, but laughed right along with them. Amber suspected she liked her little girl having a big sister as much as Amber liked being it.

They did a quick run through of the opening. It was instinct for Amber. She could easily watch him as she did the steps. He moved with a grace that far outreached any one of those little boys around her. She had to look away. She couldn't think about it or she would slip. She couldn't mess up, she knew it. Now she danced just to be there. To be there with him.

"Places!" the director yelled out, "We're on in five, fourâ€¦|â€¦|"

They took their spots and the theme music began. Turn one, step, step. Turn two, step, step. Easy as pie. Amber did her third spin when she saw the figure in the shadows. At first, she thought it was her imagination. But as she danced toward it, it became perfectly clear. Her mother. She would know her anywhere. In a raincoat, in a wig, behind those glasses, it was her. But security was supposed to stop her. Amber was supposed to be safe. She wanted to duck, but saw her mother point at her as metal glinted from her other hand being pulled from her pocket.

As Amber knew Velma, so Velma knew Amber. Her mother could hurt her but, Amber bounced back. The one thing that would devastate her would be the demise of Corny Collins. In protecting him, Amber proved the point. She glanced his way but he didn't see. He was doing just what Velma counted on. Looking at the camera and paying no attention. He WAS going down, just as she said.

Amber knew his next five steps were in her direction. She turned and ran, pushing with all her might as the flash went off. He landed on his back and she tumbled on top of him.

It was funny, Amber thought, it really didn't hurt. She could feel warmth creeping down her side, and a huge pressure like she was being squeezed, but it really didn't hurt. As he looked at her with shock and confusion, she smiled. She did it. Mother hadn't won. Amber did.

"What theâ€¦|.." he stopped as his hands touched her waist. It was wet. He brought one hand up to see it stained in red.

Amber fought to pull a breath. She looked at him and winced. "It was all worth it," she whispered, "For you." Her eyes closed and her head fell against his chest.

Dancers ran. There were screams everywhere. Link and Seaweed dodged the next shot but tackled her cleanly. All live on tv. She screamed obscenities and struggled. She was going no where.

Corny picked Amber up. He held her for a moment just taking it all in. What did she do? He wished more than anything that it had been him laying there in a puddle. "Oh God." He whispered as Maybelle rushed to his side.

"Is sheâ€|?" Maybelle asked with dread in her voice.

"She breathing." He stated, "Did some call an ambulance?"

"It's done." She said as she touched her hair.

He turned away from her and stared at Velma. How could she do this? Her own daughter. Link and a few of the boys held her as the Police arrived. Only later would they learn that Velma had lost her new position as restaurant manager because of her erratic behavior. She was pushed over the edge and did not look back. Her focus became clear in her sick mind and she acted on it. It didn't quite work out the way she had planned.

Police officers streamed in ahead of the emergency medical team. They stabilized Amber's vitals and loaded her onto the stretcher. She was taken away from the crying girls and shocked boys. Inez was hysterical and Maybelle tried to calm her. Her baby was hurting and her baby's new found sister may not make it through. She silently prayed as she looked at Corny. His guilt would far outweigh anything that had come at him before. She led Inez to where he was.

"You have to get to her." She said as she touched his shoulder. "She should have you there when she wakes up."

He looked at her. His eyes were dead. "Maybelle, this isn't fair. Why would she do this? It should have been me."

"God has a plan for all of us." Maybelle replied, as much for Inez as him. "Get going, now. She needs you."

He hurried away. Maybelle knew that if anything happened to that girl, he would never be the same.

19. Chapter 19

XIX

Maybelle spied him as she walked in with the coffee. He was asleep. Head resting on her bed, holding her hand, relief took over and he slept. She set the coffee on the side table. She had watched him pace through the entire surgery, while the local stations reported the shooting on the tv in the waiting room. He didn't want to talk, just keep moving. She tried to give him a hug, but he would have none of it. He blamed himself for this. He should have seen her mother first, he should have protected her. She did it for him and he failed her. Maybelle knew that he would only be consoled when Amber forgave him herself. If she didn't recover, neither would he.

Maybelle's Pastor arrived and they prayed. Some of the council kids arrived with their parents. Link came with Tracy and her parents. Edna had tears in her eyes as they left. Any mother, short of Velma herself, could feel the pain of this. Horrendous violence by mother

to child caused them all personal grief. Each mother could not fathom hurting her own child. How could another hurt hers?

Finally the surgeon came out. The news was all good. The bullet had passed cleanly through her thin body. The punctured lung was easily repaired, her ruptured spleen was removed and because of it, she would be continually monitored for infection. All in all, she was young and healthy. Before too long, she would be on the road to recovery. Maybelle smiled and for the first time, tears of relief came to her eyes. She looked his way. There was almost no reaction. Maybelle went to him.

"She's going to be okay, Baby" she said as she stroked his shoulders, "She'll be alright."

"I know" he whispered. She realized he was trying hard to hold it together. Trying to be the brave strong man that was expected of him. Maybelle knew better. She sat next to him and took him into her arms. She felt him tremble and heard him sigh. She waved her family away and they took the cue. They were alone as relief overtook him.

"God I couldn't live with myself if this went wrong." He sniffed.

"I know. I know." She held him a moment longer then looked into his eyes. "She's going to need you. Are you ready for that?" Maybelle asked sincerely.

He nodded.

They traveled down to the room she would stay in. She looked so little in that bed. Monitors were hooked to her with a constant beeping. Inez was the first to bedside. She hugged her and cried.

"Please come back to me Sis" she sobbed, "I need you."

Maybelle stroked her hair as Corny made a place on a recliner next to her bed. He was in for the long haul, she could tell. They sat in silence for a while until Maybelle suggested coffee. He smiled for the first time that night. Maybelle scooted out.

He looked at his tiny hero laying there. He took her hand and stared down at her.

"How did you get so brave?" he asked her closed eyes, "and what did I do to deserve your strength?"

He sat and stared at her. His eyes drifted closed and before he knew it, he too was asleep.

The room was white, stark white. Her eyes hurt from it as she tried to break out of the fog of anesthesia. She closed them and started again, slowly. Her body felt heavy and it hurt when she breathed. She tried to lift her hand to shield her eyes. It wouldn't move. She was paralyzed, she concluded. She wiggled her toes and a wave of relief washed over her. She lifted her other arm, still attached to the IV board. That one worked. Finally, she turned her head and saw him there sleeping next to her. Oh God, he really was okay. She saw her fingers firmly entwined in his and she smiled weakly. With all her strength, she brought the IV board across her body. She gently

touched his face and he startled.

"I'm sorry." She whispered.

He grinned at her and brought his hand up to her cheek, "How do you feel?"

"Fine." She lied.

"You don't have to be fine anymore. You can feel bad if you want to." He told her.

She smiled, "Okay, not so good. Are you okay?"

"I'm so mad at you, Amber Von Tussle I could spit." His angry words didn't match their tone, "Why did you do that? You could have been killed."

"I couldn't have done anything else."

"It should have been me" he said softly, "She was after me."

"No, really." She interjected, "I was her target. She just knew what would work."

"By way of me." He sighed. "Right?"

Her eyes closed. She couldn't explain it right now. She just wanted to live in the glow of him next to her, to have her dream because it was the only one left. She felt him rest his head on her shoulder. She drifted off without another thought.

20. Chapter 20

**_Thank you everyone for the R&Rs. I will be out of town until the 7th, without access to a computer. I'm so sorry. So I have added an extra chapter for you and will be back for your reading pleasure then.

> Thanks again!**

XX

Amber looked around. Her mother had succeeded in her dream, only not in the way that she wanted. Amber was famous. Her room was packed with flowers, candy and stuffed animals. The smell of roses and freesia filled the air. The nurses smiled as they brought more in. Amber finally asked them to take them to the children's ward. The room just wouldn't accommodate all of it. She sighed.

Having a shooting live on tv was a shock for all of Baltimore. It was a phenomenon across the country. They repeated the scene over and over. Right up to the second the shot was fired. She watched in fascination at first. She saw herself at the moment she recognized her mother, then her eyes looked to him, she turned and ran. Just as she remembered it. She didn't want to think about it anymore and flipped off the set.

The phone calls and requests for interviews became so numerous, they started to become unbearable. She had those she wanted to speak to,

ring once and hang up, just to have some peace. Maybelle handled some, Corny handled others. She agreed to one interview with the two of them as soon as was released. She owed it to the station to give them the exclusive. Then no more. She didn't want to be Amber the hero. She wanted to go back to that kitchen, eat some pie and bask in the love there. She wanted to go home.

Envelopes stated arriving. Cards with checks and cash. Maybelle spoke nationally about her community coming together when Amber left her mother's house. She had asked Amber before talking, if she could mention it, to help the country understand how her people were so wonderful. Amber thought it was a great idea. She didn't realize what it would bring. There were gifts and cards, but also death threats. Some people, especially in the South, did not take a white girl mixing with coloreds very lightly. The first note sent Amber into a hysterical panic, followed by a heavy dose of sedation. After that, Maybelle filtered what she saw. It was better that way.

A law firm run by a group of men from the neighborhood, volunteered to handle her finances. They would secure the council money that Amber herself had earned from Velma's frozen assets. Amber would even get her car back, along with the ability to get to her college fund. The house and everything that Velma had obtained by her power and sexual prowess, awaited her return from prison. And these men were sure she would do prison time. Three counts of attempted murder. The poor security guard who would never walk again, Amber and Corny. Secretly, Amber hoped that the security guard would end up with everything, but it wasn't hers to give away. Just another fantasy to live on.

Her eyes rested on the single red rose by her bed. The other flowers were lovely, but this one, alone in it's perfection, stood out. The one from him. He had come in with a smile and a kiss to her cheek. Every day. He fussed around her, rearranging things and helping as he could. It began to make Amber tremendously uncomfortable. She never thought that she would begin to dread seeing that smile. In person and on television, she began to turn away from his bright eyes. He constantly spoke of her actions. How she was his hero. How he would be unemployed or worse, dead, if it wasn't for her. Amber flipped off the tv to avoid it and she found herself constantly changing the subject when people would want to talk about her heroism. She didn't plan this, it just happened and in the long run, she wished it hadn't happened at all. Not that she regretted protecting him, just that he found out. Now she was sure Maybelle had been wrong. He didn't care about her, he cared about what she did. And she hated it.

The day she was to leave the hospital was joyous! She had a new dress that Inez picked out herself. Her sister was coming home and no one was getting in her way. Amber begged Maybelle to make this as private as possible. She would prefer just her family there. Of course that didn't happen. As she was wheeled out, cameras flashed and microphones were pushed into her face. Maybelle and Corny fronted and spoke to them, pulling them away as Amber stood and stepped into the car. She was finally away from all of it. She sat with her arm around Inez. She was going home!

The community made sure that the news people were not in front of Maybelle's and Amber was hugged over and over by those who truly cared about her. This was heaven. It wasn't the power her mother handed her, it wasn't the actions that Corny spoke about, it was her.

Plain and simple. No matter where she had been or what she had done, they loved her. Their family member was coming home. They let her know that she would always belong. It brought tears to her eyes.

She looked around the room as she sat in the kitchen with her tea and Helen's pie. Now she had enough money to get an apartment of her own, but had apprehensively asked Maybelle if she could just stay. She would pay her rent and perhaps share a room with Inez. They were ecstatic. Of course she had a home with them. For as long as she wanted, through college or beyond, she was always welcome. She closed her eyes and just felt it for a while. She had a home. A solid home. Like she never had before.

Corny stared at her from his vantage point by the stove. How had he missed the wonder of this girl? She was not only beautiful, but had an inner glow hidden by her mother, that when alone, always was shining through. He had seen it many a time before the big pageant that changed her life. Away from Velma, away from Link, she was happy and witty, full of charm. He knew he was right about her. And she surely proved it.

So now as he allowed himself to see her as an adult woman, not one of the dancers he couldn't morally touch or Velma's daughter, with whom touching would be followed by castration, he was amazed by her. Her laughing blue eyes that sparkled when she spoke, her way of cocking her head slightly when she was puzzled, her light lilting body as she moved, she was a work of art. Plain and simple, a work of art.

And she also had one thing more that gave him more consolation than anything else. She proved that she cared about him already. It wouldn't be an Amy situation where he would take a chance on caring, only to be crushed by his own emotions. She cared about him enough to put everything on the line and lose it. Then lose it again. He risked nothing by opening up to her. He was positive that when they were alone and he told her how he felt, she would feel the same. He would bet on it.

21. Chapter 21

XXI

After dinner was finished, the conversations were bright and happy all around her. She just wanted to escape. If she heard one more time how wonderful she was, she was going to explode. She slowly made her way back to the kids in Inez's room. Board games and music looked much better than this. She begged to join in the game of Sorry already in progress on the bed. They let her pick her color and started again. One of the girls asked to style her hair, another begged her to sing with her. This was so much better than the tribute to Amber Von Tussle going on in the other room. She could be herself in this room. She could be a kid. The kid she had never been.

Tamikia leaned in close to her as she ran small gold coins on hair pins down her French Twist. "I'm not sure how well it will stay." She complained, "Inez does it much better than I do. And your hair slips all over the place. I can't get it to stay at all. Inez can you help me with this?"

Inez stood up, "Landy, can you take my turn?" she said as she came around Amber, "You just need more spray, Meekie. Sis, close your eyes." She picked up the can and sprayed for all she was worth. Amber held her breath until it cleared. Inez held pins in her teeth as she smoothed the blonde hair and stuck in more pins. She stepped back and admired her work.

"You look beautiful." They heard from the door.

"You got that right, mister." Inez said as she looked at Corny leaning on the jam, "I can do it better than anyone!"

"It's easy when you have her to start with." He smiled.

Ugh. She was so tired of hearing him ooze over her. Suddenly she looked around. "Hey this is girl time there Mr. C. Get out." She said more rudely than what she intended.

He was a bit taken aback but the other girls joined in, waving him out of the doorway and slamming it behind him. Girl time was girl time and they had not had Amber to themselves since this whole thing happened. They smiled, quite proud of themselves for the sudden empowerment. Yolanda called out, "Do you want me to roll for you too, Amber?"

"Sure!" she smiled, "I don't want to move til this is dry. I need a five, really bad Landy. See if you can make it happen."

They chatted and sang. They all cheered when Inez won the game of Sorry. They showed her the latest dance moves and she wanted so badly to try them but knew that she wouldn't make it through the first steps before having to sit down. She was still easily winded. They moved around her, dipping and swinging. It was amazing. Without even trying, these girls were in perfect unison in time to the beat. In some ways, she envied them. She had to work to look this good. It was just natural with the girls in the room. The song ended and they laughed. Meekie looked at Amber.

"Hey Amber, when you two get married can I be a bridesmaid? I always wanted to be one." She asked sincerely.

"Me too! Me too!" she heard all around her. She flushed and looked down. That was the last thing Amber needed right now. Although, she had dreamed many a time before her mother performed her last act, about being Mrs. C. Collins, today it would be a horrible disaster. He would remain happy while that honeymoon period went by. Then a baby or two later, he would get to know the person she actually was, and he would be stuck. She didn't want to make him miserable. Not wanting him to be miserable is what got her into this whole situation, but now, if she let this go forward, it would be an even bigger mistake. Her dreams were slowly leaving her, drowned out by reality. She smiled weakly at the girls.

"One day maybe." She stated simply and she walked out of the room.

"What was that about?" Landy asked Inez.

She shrugged and went back to their music.

Amber traveled back to the adults. He beamed as she walked into the room. She forced a smile and sat by Maybelle. She looked at Amber saw her study the table. People were beginning to leave, but there was a priority above her friends. "Are you okay, Honey?"

Amber looked at her, "No. I'm not."

This was big. This child never said that she was less than "fine". Maybelle saw her eyes raise and look at Corny with contempt. WHAT was this about? For every look he gave her, filled with adoration, she returned with disdain.

"What's the matter?" Maybelle asked with wide eyes.

"I'm just tired of it." She said with a sigh, "You were wrong Maybelle. You were so wrong."

Maybelle scanned her brain. What could she be wrong about? She gave a quick hug to Amber and stood to give good-byes to her guests. People walked by Amber, kissed or embraced her then walked on to Maybelle and Corny at the door.

"Now you take care of that little hero of yours"

"You owe her so much, you know."

"You know you've got it good."

People were still singing her praises. Maybelle saw Amber wince and shake her head with every kind word. As Georgie and Helen walked by, hugs exchanged all around, Georgie turned to Corny,

"You've been blessed, Man." Georgie said.

"Yup! I have an angel watching over me!" He replied and Amber hit her limit. She slammed her hands down on the table, glared at him and headed back to the now empty room, slamming the door behind her.

"Wow, what was that?" Helen asked.

Maybelle turned to him, "You need to talk to her. Now."

Amber wanted to cry but she was too angry for tears. She looked out the window to the alley behind. Her dreams were gone. Every one. She was tired of being his anything. She just wanted to go back to the days when she looked at him and wished. When she could know that she was "his angel" without the fuss. When he saw her, and not what she did. When she was just Amber.

The door opened and he peered in. "Can I do anything for you?" he asked quietly.

"Just leave me alone."

He stepped in and pulled the door closed behind him. He silently studied her.

She could feel his eyes. She just wanted him to go away. "Look, I need some time. I need to think." Then her emotions took over, "No,

you know what I need? I need you to say 'thank you' and get out. It's all been nice and I understand that this was a really wonderful thing I did, but how about if we just get past it and let it go?" She growled.

"Thank you?" he questioned.

"Good, now leave me alone." She said as she looked down.

He stepped over to her, "But what if I don't want to?"

Now she was livid, "I know you've been spoiled with the idea that it's all about you," she said as she glared, "But it's not that way anymore. Go back to your life, Mr. Collins and let me get on with mine."

He touched her shoulder and she pulled away.

"Please, Amberâ€¦" he whispered and his tone softened her anger. This was not what she needed right now. He looked much more wounded than she had anticipated and it was not good. His eyes pleaded.

"I don't want to be a hero." She cried as she looked away, "I just want to be me."

His thoughts formed around her words. He didn't need her to be a hero. He just needed her to be his.

He took a step towards her, stood over her, and stared down into her eyes.

"Now, please," he began,

"you can't possibly think" he whispered as his hands moved to frame her face,

"with all your being," he kissed her forehead then looked at her lips,

"that in a million years" he looked in her eyes again,

"I would want to spend every moment with you", then kissed each cheek,

"only in gratitude for what you've done." His hands slipped from her face to her shoulders,

"because if you do" they slid down her arms,

"then you have no clue" and around her back to pull her closer,

"how much you truly mean to me."

His lips gently brushed hers and she sighed. She was losing every bit of resolve she had.

"Because gratitude only goes so far, little one."

He lips lingered just a little longer each time they met,

"and if you think that being grateful" he kissed her again,

"would make me feel the way I do about you" He hesitated, just a moment and she felt his arms encircle her totally,

"then you are sorely mistaken." Her hands slowly moved up his back.

"I don't think you understand." He said breathlessly into her ear as he held her, "That I care so much about you, for what you did" .."

Her body shivered at the feeling of being so close.

"but I will always love you for who you are."

She totally surrendered with those words.

22. Chapter 22

Wow, my spacing messed up totally so I deleted and split. Hope this is better!

XXII

She sat with his arms around her, crying on his shoulder. He held her, stroking her hair, sitting at Maybelle's table. They said everyone would be there to support her, her mother couldn't hurt her now, but Amber knew better. She may not be physically able to harm her, emotionally she had her beat. Velma would cut her down if she got a chance. And she felt she was in no shape to handle it. Their wedding had been quick and quiet so as to avoid the media, but still had all those young girls bathed in pink preceding the bride. It wasn't too long after that she announced their baby was due. Now, ten months after the shooting, they were called to testify.

"I can't do this." She sobbed, "I just can't. She's going to do something. I can feel it."

"Honey, this is something you just have to do" Maybelle said firmly, "For your husband and your baby. You have got to do it. Without you, she may be back out in a few years. I wouldn't put it past her to come after you again."

"Oh" She rubbed her forehead against him and fell silent. She knew that Maybelle was right. She was positive that her mother plotted even as they spoke. She would look for a way to get back at her. Through Corny, through her own grandchild, her mother knew no bounds. It terrified her.

"Come on, Baby" Corny tried to comfort her, "I'll be there, we'll all be there. The place will be swarming with cops. You don't have to worry about anything."

She didn't have to worry about anything the last time either. Now if Velma was able to get to her, there was more than just his life hanging in the balance. What if she found a way? What if it was like before? Who would she chose to protect? Him, or the small life inside her? She moaned at the thought.

"Momma, what about Isaiah?" Seaweed broke in, "Could he take the day off and go with her?"

Isaiah had protected Amber that first night in the neighborhood and if Maybelle asked, would do it for his Auntie. "That's an idea." Maybelle smiled, "I'm sure he can escort you. He'll be watching just for you."

Amber lit up for the first time. "Will he?"

Corny smiled as she seemed to relax. She looked from Maybelle to Corny. She might just be able to make it.

"I'll call him," Maybelle replied, "This is too important for you to skip and you're making yourself sick. You need to calm down., or that baby will have colic." She pointed at Seaweed, "I had one. They aren't fun."

Seaweed snapped, "Hey!"

"You still have your moments, boy." She smiled and gave him a pat. "Now, you need to have just a little bite. You're looking pale. How bout some mac? Made it fresh this morning!"

Amber grinned. Macaroni and Cheese served with love. Just what the doctor ordered.

"That's my girl" Maybelle smiled, "You're gonna be okay. We'll see to it"

23. Chapter 22b

XXII-b

"Zip it" she cried, "You've got to get it zipped."

Corny tried again, but the carriage would not go past her thick middle. "I can't get it. I'm going to catch your skin"

"I don't care. Please" she cried, "Try again." Amber sucked in as much breath as she could. It seemed to only make it worse. He pulled again. "Wait" She laid face down on the bed. "Now try." The carriage slowly went past the point it did before. She smiled, but as she pushed up, the teeth gave way. It broke.

"Oh hell." Corny said as he helped her up. "How about your beige suit?"

"I can't get it buttoned in the front. I can't get the skirt zipped." She said with a sigh. There were women who could avoid maternity clothes through most of their pregnancies. Here at sixteen weeks, she had blossomed. Everyone told her that it meant a boy. He glowed when she told him, but right now it was not convenient.

"You're just going to have to pick one of theseâ€|â€|" he pointed to the box of maternity clothes her friends gathered for her.

"No, we need to find something to fit." Amber stated looking through

the closet. She pulled out two more and tried again. Nothing would work. She frowned.

"It's got to be one of these." He said strutted to the box, "How about this?" He held up a black and white smock with a matching black skirt. It was darling. It was also obviously a maternity outfit. She could wear it to church on Sunday without a problem but not next week in court. She wanted desperately to look normal. To walk into that courtroom and not give her mother any indication of her condition.

"Honey, you're going to be beautiful no matter what." He smiled at her.

She didn't care about beautiful right at the moment. She searched through the box. Everything looked like she could carry a basketball under it. She sighed. "Let me have that."

She slipped on the skirt and buttoned the top. She spied herself in the mirror. Suddenly it hit her, she really was pregnant. Up until this point, although she was told it was so then her middle got thicker and she could feel the growing lump between her hipbones, it had never shown. Her hands ran down her abdomen. There was someone in there. Someone from him. No one could take it away. A sudden pride overcame her. She couldn't help but smile.

"That looks great!" he broke into her thoughts, "You look fine."

"Thank you." Her blue eyes sparkled at him, "For everything."

"You have nothing to thank me for" He said as he put an arm around her and looked in the mirror. "Everything I give you is my pleasure." He kissed her head, "Really, my pleasure." He gazed at her. "My pleasure, reallyâ€¦" His lips found hers then moved to the hollow of her throat, her arms went around his neck and her head fell back. She closed her eyes.

"Mine tooâ€¦" She thought as he guided her back onto the bed.

24. Chapter 23

XXIII

Cameras flashed, men spoke into microphones, nothing less than she expected. Velma's trial had been a circus from the beginning. She was vocal and demanding, crying at the injustice at one point then sullenly quiet, playing the wounded beauty queen at another. Her lawyers pushed for an insanity plea, stating she was driven over the edge by her own daughter influenced by the older man she was having an affair with. The two of them were fighting against her. Amber blanched when she heard it. She was fighting against her alright, to stop her from destroying that older man she was far from having an affair with. It wasn't being portrayed that way. She had been a spoiled, ungrateful child who drove Velma away when she could no longer use her. To Velma, losing her only daughter was just unbearable. She snapped.

Amber had not only worked against Velma, but also Brenda's parents,

who could not see their grandson so far away. Brenda's mother cried on the stand when she testified on Velma's behalf. Amber had tricked her, telling her that she represented her mother, who only wanted to help poor Brenda overcome her problems. Now she was far away and Mrs. Wheeler would never see that darling baby. Amber had to laugh. She had been more than willing to give that "darling baby" to anyone to get it out of the way. Now she pined for her grandson. Right! She was sure that this woman was being paid well. She even hinted that Amber paid Brenda to get rid of her, while protecting her own lover, the father of Brenda's baby. Apparently someone told her that this was a window she didn't want to open. Defamation of character could get her sued, but she just had to get it in. It became a big deal in the case.

Amber had whipped a slipper at the tv anchorman reporting the story. She thought she would feel better as it bounced off the set, but then just felt remorse. Her mother would have done that. She was not her mother. She would never throw anything again.

Corny had an arm around her waist as they went up the steps of the courthouse. Her feet barely touched the ground. Isaiah led the way in full uniform, with a sea of dark faces following behind him. She felt safer at this point than she expected to. The doors ahead of her opened and her friends began to find seats. Isaiah moved to the right, as Corny and Amber stepped into the doorway. She caught sight of her mother's eyes. They grew wide. She slowly stood as they entered. "You bastard." She mouthed as her lawyer pulled her down. Amber stopped. She brought her purse in front of her without thinking, instinctively covering her unborn child.

"Don't look at her," Corny commanded, "She can't do anything now." He led her to a back seat but Amber's eyes could not leave her. She flashed back to her childhood. She needed to know when to duck.

The prosecution was in high gear. Many a person, including some of the Council members would attest to the fact that Velma could be vindictive. Long before she switched the tallies of the contest, she would crush people who would not do her bidding. Pauly told of being slapped for refusing to dance when he turned an ankle, Wilbur Turnblad told of her attempt to seduce him, over and over the stories were told. Velma didn't lose it and snap. She had a particular way of doing things and it came to light that day in the studio, only this time with a gun. She wasn't any different.

Corny was called. He kissed Amber's cheek as he stood. Velma squinted her eyes and an audible hiss could be heard. As he walked up the aisle, Velma's eyes stared at Amber. Amber stared at him. She had hoped that Isaiah would follow him but he didn't. He stayed in his place behind her. She found herself praying that he would come back to her soon. He was sworn in and sat by the judge.

"Mr. Collins, you are employed by WYZZ, channel 12, correct?" the lawyer began.

"Yes, that's correct." He smiled as he answered, looking smooth and comfortable.

The questions droned on. He relayed Velma's love of power, her attempt to seduce him personally, and all the facts of the situation until the shot was fired. On cross examination, all attempts to

discredit him, rolled of his back and he answered them with a twinkle in his eye. He seemed to be enjoying the whole situation. The prosecution rested and the defense was up.

"Mr. Collins, did you ever have sexual relations with one, Brenda Wheeler?" The defense attorney asked.

His eyebrows lifted, "No. Brenda was taken. You will want to talk to Eddy McFee, the father of her child and by now, her husband, I'm sure." The room murmured.

"Did you ever have sexual relations with one, Amber Von Tussle?"

He smiled and winked at Amber, "Why yes I have! Don't you sleep with your wife?" The courtroom exploded in laughter. The judge banged the gavel down.

"The gallery will be silent or I will clear this courtroom." He turned to the stand. "Mr. Collins, I'd appreciate if you'd just answer the questions, not ask them."

He looked down, still smiling, "Yes, sir. No, I never had sexual relations with Amber Von Tussle. I have had sexual relations with Amber Collins, the former Amber Von Tussle. She is my wife." He looked over to Velma and flashed that million dollar smile. She was his and not hers anymore. Velma glared.

"So you are stating, under oath, that you never slept with the daughter of Velma Von Tussle before the time of your marriage to her." The lawyer pushed. "You had no kind of relationship with her."

"Only professionally." He stated honestly, "We began a relationship after her hospital stay, recovering from her injuries sustained when her mother shot her." The room filled with whispers.

Velma's lawyer drilled him. Questions about Amy, about his past, about Amber. He outshined every one, never missing a beat. The attorney seemed to understand that he would get no where with this man. The defense rested and the prosecution chose not to cross examine. He was excused and came back to her. She stood and threw her arms around him as she heard the bailiff announce,

"The Prosecution calls Amber Collins to the stand."

25. Chapter 24

**This story is almost over. Thank you so much to all of you who reviewed, read and favorited.**

**I will be putting up another story within the next couple of days. It's a bit different but should be enjoyable! After my last three stories, I had to cut Velma a break. For the Velma fans, she will be a lovable character.**

XXIV

Her knees buckled and she clung to him. "You have to do this," he whispered in her ear, "You can do it! I'll be right here for you,

Baby. You just keep looking at me. Don't look her way."

Amber looked around. Every face smiled at her. She felt as if she had a hundred miles to walk up to that stand. Isaiah came up to her, "Move Amber. I'm right with you."

She took a step into the aisle and people touched her as she walked by. She looked at each one of them and returned their smiles. Her family would give her the strength to handle all of this. She couldn't do it without them. Isaiah stopped at the first row, between her mother and the stand. He turned to watch Velma. He would not let her by should she attempt to get to her daughter.

She walked up and put her hand on the bible, "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

"I do." She said. She looked to Corny and he had a huge, but forced smile. She knew he was concerned, but all she could do was give him a smile back. She took a deep breath.

"State your name." the Bailiff requested.

"Amber Collins." Unconsciously she glanced at her mother. The woman snorted.

"Mrs. Collins, you were also employed by WYZT, channel 12 between the years ofâ€¦|.."

Amber listened intently to each question. She answered as honestly as she could. She told of the years her mother would have fits of rage and she sometimes got in the way, of the dance lessons where her feet would bleed but still she was expected to perform, the men who shared her mother's bed, Velma's hatred for Corny and the phone call she made to her aunt. Finally the questions began about the Pageant of 1962. She explained the phone call she over heard with Amy and what she concluded from it.

"So why did you go against your mother to defend Mr. Collins?" the attorney asked.

She looked at her husband. His face was serious for the first time. She smiled. "Because he was so unbelievably kind to me. Even when I was horrible, he was never unkind. He told me he was sorry about what happened to me. He told me I wasn't my mother. No one thought of me as anything but another 'her'. But he said he knew I did nothing wrong and he meant it. I could see in his eyes that he meant it." He smiled again and she continued, "I knew what my mother could do. I knew that she would destroy him. I couldn't let that happen." She viewed her mother. Velma's eyes were on fire.

"Mrs. Collins, were you having sexual relations with your future husband at that time?" he asked.

Amber laughed, "No. He was seeing Amy Hughes, our make-up girl."

"Were you involved with him at all? Were you in love with him?" The man quizzed.

Was she? She paused. "I would have to say yes." She sighed, "I didn't

know it or wouldn't admit it, but I have always loved him. I always will, but we weren't personally involved at that time"

Corny looked down with a smile. Giving her a chance was the best decision of his life.

"Mrs. Collins, did you contact Brenda Wheeler?"

"Yes. I found her number in my mother's desk. I was looking for her next move after the whole Amy situation." Amy had been subpoenaed and plea bargained to testify against Velma in exchange for a lesser charge on passing bad checks. Her story was already established. "When I called her house, her mother let it slip that my mother had called her. I just put two and two together. Brenda wanted to get to Eddy. She didn't want to give her baby up. She wanted to marry Eddy, but her parents wouldn't let her. I knew she was desperate. If I hadn't gotten her that money, she would have taken my mother's offer and named Corny as the father of her baby. It wasn't right."

"So are you saying that Corny Collins is not the father of Brenda Wheeler's baby?" he asked.

"Yes, that is exactly what I am saying!" Amber's voice was louder than she expected, "Everyone knew who the father of that baby was. We all knew before she left the show. She told us. No one would even think that anyone was the baby's father but Eddy. She loved him for two years. She wouldn't be with anyone else!"

The room murmured. The council all knew. There was never a thought that Corny was with Brenda. It was just beyond reason. The gavel banged, "Quiet please." The judge called out.

"Mrs. Collins I would like to take you back to 1959." The attorney began

What was this about? Amber looked at him with a quizzical look.

"In that year, your stepfather died. Your mother was under investigation for the unexpected demise. Without a history of breathing problems, he suffocated by a constriction of his airway. It was a suspicious death."

"Yes, my mother was cleared of all charges in that." Amber replied as she looked to Velma. Her face was flushed, her eyes were wide. For the first time, her composure left her.

"Now Mrs. Collins, think. Think very hard. Was there any kind of substance in your home that could have aided in the death of your stepfather? Something you never saw before. Rat poison? Any drugs? Do you remember anything suspicious?"

Amber thought hard. It seemed like forever ago. She mentally scanned their kitchen cabinets. Nothing.

"No I don't think so." Amber said with her eyebrows knitting together.

"Are you sure?" the lawyer asked again.

Amber thought again. What was unusual? What was different?

"I think I'm sure." She replied.

"Then Mrs. Collins, I have no moreâ€|â€|"

"Wait!" A thought came to her. She somehow remembered something. Something her mother had gotten for menstrual cramps, recommended by their hairdresser. Amber had cramps herself one day and wanted to take some. Her mother yanked it out of her hand. She pushed her out of the bathroom and slammed the door. Amber found it odd. Later she read the bottle and it scared her. Deadly Nightshade was in parenthesis. Lethal in the wrong dose.

"Belladonna. She bought belladonna elixir from the lady at the Beauty Shop. She got it for cramps" Amber cried with wide eyes.

Velma slammed her fists down on the table. "You lying bitch! You'd say anything to get me out of the way. You and that bastard you're sleeping with!! You lyingâ€|." She was up from her seat before anyone could stop her but Isaiah caught her as she went by. The room exploded.

Corny was by her side before she could even think. She clung to him and he led her off the stand, putting his body between his wife and her mother.

"Thank you, Mrs. Collins. I have no more questions." The attorney said but no one heard. This man took a chance on a hunch and it paid off. He smiled. Now Velma would have bigger problems than the attempted murder charges. They would exhume the body of her dead husband. If belladonna was in his system, it most probably caused his respiratory system to shut down, and his death. She would be charged with murder. Her money and power couldn't save her this time. It didn't look good for Velma Von Tussle.

The judge was banging his gavel, Velma was being handcuffed, still screaming at her daughter as Corny led Amber away. Reporters were running out of the room in hopes of being the first to get to the phone. The story was bigger than ever.

"The court is in recess until tomorrow morning." The judge exclaimed. The gavel banged a final time.

Amber looked at Corny, "She killed him didn't she? She killed Ronnie." Her eyes were wide.

"It doesn't matter now, Baby. We're okay. We don't have to worry about her anymore." He leaned down and kissed her, "You did great. Let's get out of here."

Velma was screaming threats as they walked out the door. She looked at her one more time before she turned away. Corny was right, Amber wasn't going to worry about her anymore.

26. Chapter 25

Epilogue

Maybelle watched her fuss over that baby. She finally got her little

girl that she had hoped for. The three boys were wonderful, with the bright eyes of their father and each with a different hair hue of hair, that made them all laugh, but that little girl was the most precious thing on earth. She would never be abused and abandoned as her mother was. She held a special place, with a mother who adored her and a father who looked with glee at every movement she made. She was well loved.

Maybelle took the baby. "Get something to eat and let me have time with my baby. You're being greedy."

Amber laughed. "You know how I am! Greedy from the start." And she made her way to the plates.

Maybelle looked at the little bundle she held. One day, she would be told about how her parents came together, about her grandmother, sitting in jail for a good long time and how much love flowed around her. No, she wouldn't have to be told that. Maybelle looked to Amber as her husband kissed her. She smiled at him and he fed her from his fork. After five years of marriage, it was still fresh for them. As fresh as Seaweed and Penny's, married only a year before. Some couples lost it. They drifted to childcare and money woes. But these two never seemed to drift. They still looked at each other with that quiet awe that young married couples shared. She somehow knew that would be forever. With everything they had been through, all else paled in comparison. The worst was already past.

Corny made his way to Maybelle and stared at his little girl. "She looks like her momma, dontcha think?"

"That dark hair is yours."

He smiled, "It looks better on her." He looked around, "You should hand her to Penny. Let her get a feel for motherhood before she's in the spotlight." They looked to Penny, sitting in the rocking chair, gently swirling her hands over her protruding belly. Life was renewing in this house. Maybelle smiled.

"No, I need to keep her for a while." She replied, touching the baby's cheek.

"Daaeee." Little Robby ran to his dad and Corny swept him up. "Willie got my blue, he won't give it back"

"Aren't there other crayons?" Corny asked showing great concern over this huge tragedy.

"No, I need blue." He whined, "I'm making Mommy's eyes."

"Oh well that is important, isn't it" Corny smiled and winked at Maybelle, "What did Auntie Inez say?"

"She says share butâ€¦"

"Let me go save Inez, she'll be in the middle of a fight in a minute." Corny carried his son to the corner where Inez stood holding the crayon above her head as the other girls laughed. Willie and Matt jumped to get it. He snatched the crayon, squatted down to lecture the boys. When he stood he hugged Inez and she smiled as he handed her back "the blue". They all seemed to go back to coloring on

Daddy's word.

Maybelle's eyes swept the room. Amber was sitting with Penny, her hand rested on Penny's abdomen as they spoke. Seaweed slapped Corny on the back and led him to where the men were playing cards, the voices of her family surrounded her. She looked down at the brand new love of her life.

"Little May, you don't know how good you have it." And she kissed the baby's cheek.

End
file.